

CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers

WASHER-DRYERS

OUTDOOR HEATERS

ICE COOKERS

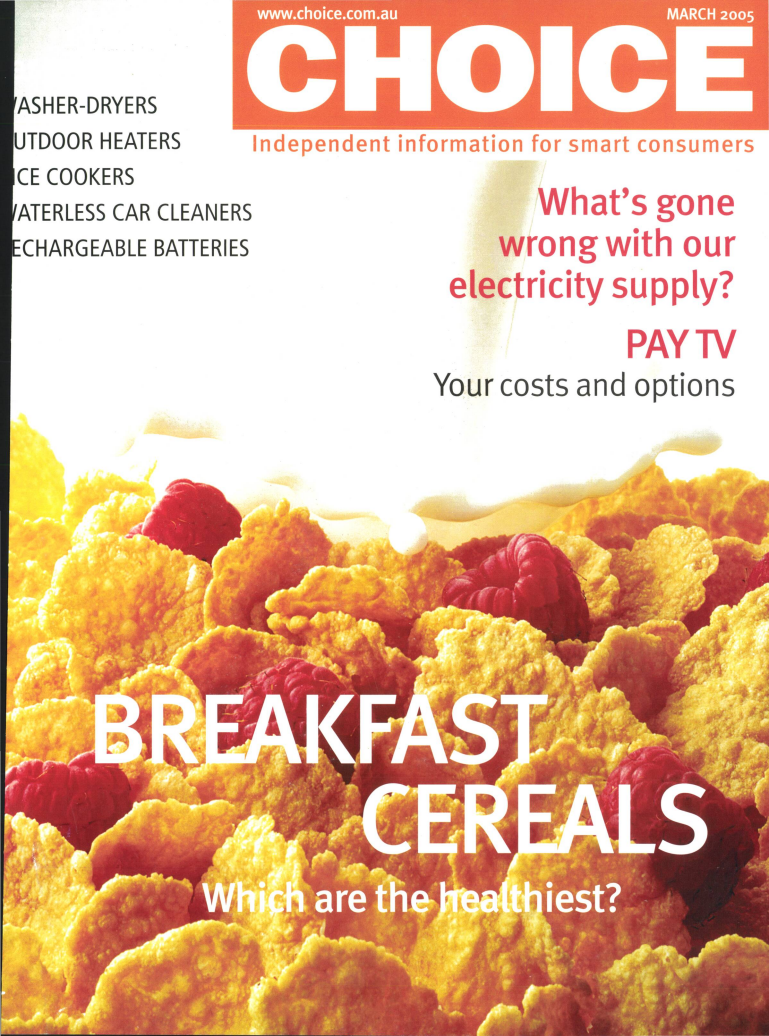
WATERLESS CAR CLEANERS

RECHARGEABLE BATTERIES

What's gone
wrong with our
electricity supply?

PAY TV

Your costs and options



BREAKFAST CEREALS

Which are the healthiest?

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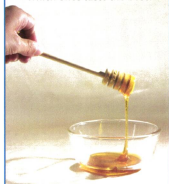
Cheap cordless drills



Are those \$20 or
\$30 drills really
any good?

Honey

Which ones taste the best?



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Cereal or waffle?

CHOICE regularly looks at the breakfast cereals market (see page 8 for our latest report), because for many people they're a staple food, new ones are released all the time, and subscribers tell us the most important factor for them when choosing a cereal is whether it's healthy.

Some ads would have us believe certain breakfast cereals are healthy because of all the added vitamins and minerals they contain. These days, though, so many cereals have these added to them that it's hardly a discriminator between them any more. In fact, cereals are essentially a healthy breakfast choice because they're based on high-fibre grains, and the closer the packaged versions stay to the original whole grain, the healthier they are. Of the 150 cereals we looked at, only about 40 met this criterion.

Kids get a particularly raw deal from cereal manufacturers when you look at it from the above point of view. Unlike the original grains, most cereals marketed at kids are low in fibre but packed with added sugar and/or sodium. They won't help as much as they could to give your child a good nutritional headstart for the day.

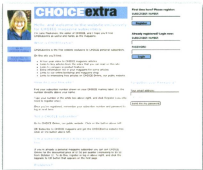
Manufacturers don't have to sell us this sugary pap to make a profit — just look at Weet-Bix, which is the top-selling cereal in Australia yet one of the healthiest available. And they're perfectly capable of changing their recipes to produce healthier cereals — so why aren't they doing it, given that's what consumers are telling them they want, instead of refining the grains to vanishing point and waffling on about added vitamins and minerals?



Jane Mackenzie,
Editor

FOR MEMBERS ONLY

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Photo: Australphoto

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Burn, baby, burn...

Many solarium operators in Melbourne are neglecting their responsibility to protect their customers and are disregarding the voluntary Australian and New Zealand standard on solariums for cosmetic purposes, according to the Cancer Council Victoria.

The Cancer Council sent underage and fair-skinned 'customers' to 30 solarium centres throughout Melbourne in order to determine their level of compliance with the standard. Late last year it released the alarming findings of the undercover study.

More than half (52%) of the

16-year-olds in the study could gain access to Melbourne solariums without having to produce parental consent, although the standard stipulates, among other things, that children under 15 aren't allowed to use a tanning unit and people aged 15-17 must have parental or guardian consent.

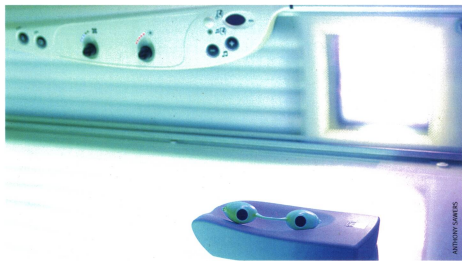
The standard, which was reviewed (by relevant organisations including solarium industry representatives) and updated in 2002, was established to protect customers. Research shows that the more exposure children and adolescents have to UV radiation, the greater their risk of skin cancer later in life.

According to the Cancer Council's SunSmart program manager, Julie Hassard, a solarium can emit UV radiation five times as strong as the midday summer sun, and subjecting young people's skin to these excessive amounts can be dangerous. "It's important that the public understand that solariums will increase the risk of skin cancer," she said.

The study also found that 90% of very fair-skinned people could gain access to Melbourne solariums, although the standard stipulates they shouldn't use them. "Most redheads and people with very fair skin will never tan, as their skin isn't capable of turning brown," Ms Hassard said. "Their skin is more sensitive to UV radiation. It's frightening to think that solarium operators overlook this danger for the sake of a sale."

As an immediate action the Cancer Council Victoria would like to see the closing down of those solariums that can't comply with the standard, such as coin-operated, 'self-serve' solariums and unsupervised solariums in health and fitness centres, where staff aren't trained to assess skin types.

Its ultimate aim is national regulation of the industry. "But it won't happen overnight," Ms Hassard said, "so we're also raising awareness through the media."



CONSUMER RIGHTS STILL VALID ONLINE

If you're buying something online you have the same rights as if you make a purchase at a shopping centre, even if the internet site you're buying from tries to tell you otherwise.

According to a survey by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), many internet sites that sell goods or services appear to be trying to deny consumers their legal rights.

More than half the Australian sites surveyed had online terms and conditions that attempted to disclaim consumers' warranty rights or limit liability. Some clauses raised concerns because they misrepresented consumers' rights or attempted to exclude basic statutory rights that are implied by the Trade Practices Act and can't be excluded.

Businesses too face threats as a result of online scams such as fake billing, when payment is sought for bogus entries in trade journals and magazines.

"In short, the Trade Practices Act *does* apply to the internet, and business and consumers have the same rights and responsibilities trading on the internet as they do in a regular store," said ACCC Deputy Chair Louise Sylvan.

According to the ACCC, the internet has been a great boon for Australian consumers and business, removing geographic barriers and allowing traders to compete for markets worldwide.

"The downside is that the scamsters have become smart about the technology too and honest businesses, consumers and regulators need to do more to ensure that shopping and transacting online is just as safe as shopping in person at the mall," Ms Sylvan said.

To brush up on your consumer rights and find out what to look out for when buying online, check out the ACCC website (www.accc.gov.au), which has heaps of relevant information, or phone the ACCC Infocentre on 1300 302 502 and ask for a copy of the brochure *Your online rights*.

UPDATE

TV TOPPLES TODDLER

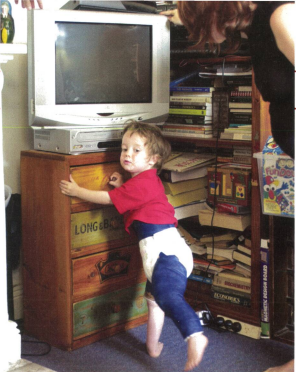
Following our recent article (CHOICE, October 2004) highlighting the dangers of unstable televisions toppling onto young children, we were contacted with a story that illustrates exactly how easily this can happen.

In late November 2004, Nicholas Morrow, who's nearly three, was playing in the front room of his house while his mother Clare was in the kitchen. His father James, who works from home, was busy in the next room. Then James heard a crash.

"I rushed in and the TV was over and he was just sitting amidst the machines," he says. Clearly in shock, Nicholas was quiet, but before long his left leg began to swell. Clare, a trainee nurse, recognised the tell-tale sign of a fracture. A trip to the children's hospital confirmed her diagnosis and Nicholas spent the next few days there in traction. Then he was put in a body-cast he had to wear during the hot summer.

When CHOICE visited the Morrows and asked Nicholas to demonstrate what had happened (see the photo, right), his actions showed that even though his family had tried to follow the manufacturer's safety instructions — which basically just said not to put the TV any place little children could reach — it was still an accident waiting to happen. Installed on top of a chest of drawers, when Nicholas tugged on a drawer handle, the TV rocked and was clearly unstable.

"We've become a community service announcement to bolt



TAMARA GRAHAM

your TV to the wall," says Clare, who observes that even when she tells people their story it's amazing how few think it could happen to them. "Most say their children are too young, or the TV's too high or so low it won't fall, or 'they know not to touch the TV'."

CHOICE is working with Standards Australia to improve the test for TV stability and to add a test for TV stand stability. In the meantime, we'd like to see manufacturers of televisions make them safer by supplying an anchor point at the back of the set and appropriate fittings for you to anchor it safely in your home.

CAN YOU HELP?

CHANGING SUPER FUNDS?

Are you thinking about changing your super fund when super choice is introduced in July?

- Why do you want to change?
- How will you go about finding a new fund?

If you've already changed funds recently:

- Why and when did you change?
- Are you happy with your new fund?

Please write to **Superchoice**, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or send an email to superchoice@choice.com.au by March 21. Thank you for your help.

Fighting the flab

The Parents Jury is a web-based network for parents who want to improve the food and physical activity environments for children in Australia. It was launched in August 2004 by the Cancer Council Victoria, Diabetes Australia — Victoria and the Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity.

The initiative is based on a concept of the same name that's been operating in the UK since 2002. The UK Parents Jury has been using parent power to drive campaigns like "chuck snacks off the checkout" and other initiatives to combat the inappropriate marketing of unhealthy food to children.

Parents Jury is only open to parents, guardians and grandparents of a child or children under 18. As it's a web-based forum, members need access to email and the internet.

Parents Jury wants parents to get together to fight against overweight and obesity in Australia. Through its website, parents



are encouraged to share their views about issues such as food advertising to children and the availability of physical activity in schools. Members are also invited to tell food manufacturers and retailers, regulators and governments, advertisers, the media and schools what they think about issues related to food and physical activity for children.

If you're interested in getting involved, register online by going to www.parentsjury.org.au.

URBAN MYTH: AIR FRESHENER FIRE HAZARD

CHOICE subscribers often forward us information about faulty products. Sometimes they alert us to a new problem we should investigate, but other times, well, what they've found is some good old internet myth-mongering. Like the following story that's been circulating about plug-in air fresheners causing house fires.

The email, allegedly a 'Safety Warning' from the South Australian Country Fire Service, states that a plug-in GLADE air freshener caused a house fire in South Australia where, due to the plug-in's flimsy construction, it ignited, with the subsequent fire burning the whole place down. The email then quotes an investigator saying he had seen many such incidents.

But when we contacted the South Australian Country Fire Service they told us they hadn't authorised this email and they don't support its contents. Nor, it appears, does the employee named have any knowledge of the original email. Other fire services we contacted also said they hadn't heard of this incident. And SC JOHNSON, manufacturer of GLADE, says it has no knowledge of any credible reports of any such fires and that its **PlugIns** are safe and won't cause fires.

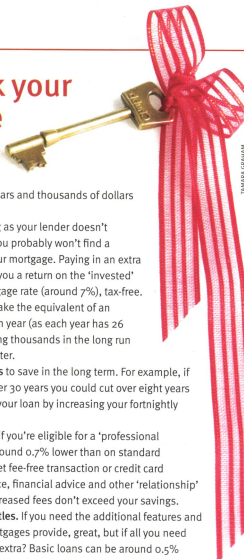
However, fire authorities also emphasise that few electrical appliances are designed for 24/7 use — and that fires caused by computer monitors, TVs and mobile phone battery chargers prove this. So their advice is: "If you're not using the appliance, turn it off at the power point." And, of course, make sure you have a working smoke alarm and check it regularly.

Fast-track your mortgage

Is your mortgage stuck in the slow lane? CHOICE *Money & Rights* magazine suggests five ways to cut years and thousands of dollars in interest off your loan:

- **Pay a lump sum.** As long as your lender doesn't penalise extra payments, you probably won't find a better 'investment' than your mortgage. Paying in an extra lump sum effectively gives you a return on the 'invested' amount equal to your mortgage rate (around 7%), tax-free.
- **Pay fortnightly.** You'll make the equivalent of an extra month's payment each year (as each year has 26 fortnights), potentially saving thousands in the long run and paying off your loan faster.
- **Make bigger repayments** to save in the long term. For example, if you borrowed \$200,000 over 30 years you could cut over eight years and \$87,000 in interest off your loan by increasing your fortnightly payment by \$100.
- **Turn pro.** Ask your bank if you're eligible for a 'professional package'. Interest can be around 0.7% lower than on standard mortgages and you might get fee-free transaction or credit card accounts, discount insurance, financial advice and other 'relationship' benefits. Just check that increased fees don't exceed your savings.
- **Ditch the bells and whistles.** If you need the additional features and flexibility that premium mortgages provide, great, but if all you need is a 'no-frills' loan, why pay extra? Basic loans can be around 0.5% cheaper than standard variable rates. Remember to check for fees and restrictions.

CHOICE *Money & Rights* gives more money-saving tips as well as the pros and cons of refinancing, debt consolidation and offset accounts. To subscribe call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.



WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

BEATING BUREAUCRACY

When a travel agent bungled one UK resident's daughter's name on a flight ticket and she faced missing the family holiday in Florida, he resorted to unusual means to beat a bureaucratic nightmare, reports the UK *Which?* magazine. If they'd cancelled the flight and tried to rebook under the daughter's real name, they might have lost the seat to someone on the waiting list, according to the travel agent. So the father convinced his reluctant daughter to change her name by deed poll from Anna to Sarah, as was listed on the ticket. The travel agency later reimbursed the family the costs of Anna's name change — for "sheer ingenuity and originality".

HEALTHIER MILK, NATURALLY

Irish research has found that cows fed a diet rich in rapeseed oil produce milk that's lower in saturated fat and healthier for human consumption. The study showed that adding 600 g of rapeseed oil to cows' daily feed produced milk with 26% less palmitic acid, a saturated fat that's been linked to heart disease and obesity, reports Ireland's *Consumer Choice*.

INSPECTING THE INACCESSIBLE

Management at the 14th century cathedral in York has come up with "most inventive means" to inspect inaccessible areas in the building without having to put up scaffolding and disturb the congregation. Ireland's *Consumer Choice* reports that they use a helium-filled, radio-controlled mini airship carrying digital cameras to inspect their stained-glass windows and stonework. "I imagine that the initial raising of eyes towards heaven caused quite a shock for the faithful," the magazine remarks.

Potential rainwater hazards

Thank you for your article on rainwater tanks. An issue I bring to your attention when using rainwater for drinking is the potential for contamination. Rainwater picks up particles from animal and bird droppings and vegetative remnants as it flows over roofing and gutters.

Tankwater also warms up, with the potential to brew a bacterial soup. I have personal experience of this. It can be countered by boiling or treating the water with sodium hypochlorite until it can just be detected by tasting. There is another potential issue with heavy metal contamination from roofs with lead or copper flashing, and industrial fallout in urban areas.

For these reasons I wouldn't drink rainwater unless it was treated. Your readers may not be aware of these hazards.

Rod Incoll, by email

As we mentioned in our article, a first-flush device is considered a must if you want to drink the rainwater you collect in a tank. It diverts the first few litres of rainfall, which could contain dirt and debris from the roof, away from the tank.

According to the National Environmental Health Forum, "Regular disinfection of rainwater held in domestic tanks is not considered necessary in most cases and is generally only



recommended as a remedial action. In the absence of any known problems and if the water is clear, essentially odourless and does not contain any suspended material it is unlikely to cause illness in most users."

People with a lowered immune response are advised to boil the rainwater (at a rolling boil for at least one minute), then cool and store it in a clean container before use. Rainwater may also be chlorinated, which is effective against harmful bacteria and many viruses, but may only have a limited effect against giardia and cryptosporidium. For effective chlorine disinfection, add 40 mL of sodium hypochlorite (12.5% available chlorine), or 7 g of granular calcium hypochlorite (75% available chlorine) per 1000 L of water.

For more information you can download Guidance on use of rainwater tanks at www.health.gov.au (type 'rainwater tanks' in the search box).

Size does matter

We're a household of six and recently had an almost 20,000 L

rainwater tank installed and connected to the house to supply our considerable water requirements. The response from the children has been encouraging, with our five-year-old commenting, "If you have a big tank, you're rich, if you have no tank, or a small one, you're not rich."

Hopefully we're contributing to future responsible water use, as well as supplying our own immediate needs.

Genevieve Matters, Belair, SA

Using greywater

I recently contemplated pumping the greywater from our washing machine onto our garden via an extended hose, but a very helpful hardware store salesperson warned I would probably burn out the pump on the washing machine due to the increased back pressure. An inquiry made to the manufacturer of our admittedly older washing machine confirmed this would almost certainly occur. When I queried the capability of new washing machines, the response was the same.

If the technical advice received was in fact correct, it would appear prudent for anyone contemplating this water-saving action to contact their washing machine manufacturer before proceeding. However, CHOICE technicians may wish to conduct their own independent assessments and advise members of the results.

John Fulton, Canberra, ACT

THUMBS UP!



■ Anne Maloney, via email, awards a thumbs-up to

SNOW GEAR RECYCLE in Keppera, Queensland, which exchanged, on Christmas Day last year, ill-fitting thermal underwear she'd bought for her son, who was leaving for Bulgaria (and sub-zero temperatures) before the shop reopened after the holidays.

■ Barbara Little of Caulfield, Victoria, gives a thumbs-up to **MAX'S DEPARTMENT STORE** on Norfolk Island, where she'd bought a handbag on the last day of her holiday. On discovering at home that the bag had a defect, she emailed the store, which promptly sent her a replacement handbag without her having to return the defective bag.

Washing machine pumps are only designed to get the water down the drain. While the flow rate is quite high, the pressure isn't high enough to send the water down a garden hose and produce a jet of water at the nozzle. So don't attempt to divert your laundry water this way.

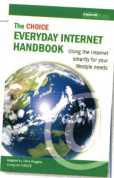
If the relevant authorities allow the diversion of untreated greywater in your area, you may want to install a greywater diversion system. Our article 'Saving water' (CHOICE, November 2004) discusses the important issues you need to consider and includes a brief description of the systems available. The most basic one, a gravity diversion system, includes a valve, switch or tap that you fit above the S-bend to the outlet of the laundry tub's waste pipe and switch on when you want to divert the water. This way you aren't using your washer's pump.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to *Thumbs Up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Genevieve Matters of Belair, SA, receives *The CHOICE Everyday Internet Handbook* or any other book of her choice from *Consumer Bookshelf*, pages 47–48.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.





BREAKFAST BASICS

What's good and what's not: it's time to take cereals seriously.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ **From 150 ready-to-eat breakfast cereals we found about 40 that would be your best choices (see right), so there should be something to suit all tastes. These cereals are high in fibre, and don't contain too much sugar, fat or salt. (See the Breakfast cereals table, page 10, and Kids' cereals, page 12, for all the cereals we looked at.)**

■ **The bad news is that most cereals aimed specifically at kids are fibre-flimsy and too sugary or salty for everyday eating. See Kids cop it, page 12.**

■ **In our taste test of more than 30 high-fibre mueslis, NAYTURA Premium Muesli came out top. See the Muesli table, page 13, for how the rest rated.**

For many of us, ready-to-eat breakfast cereals are still a staple food, and a good one can be the perfect kick-start to the day. It's commonly acknowledged that breakfast is an important meal, so it's best not to skip it. If you don't have the time to sit down to eat, there's a growing range of on-the-go breakfast options to choose from (see *Quick breakfasts*, CHOICE, September 2004), which are better than no breakfast at all — but a good cereal is generally a better choice.

We looked at over 180 cereals and mueslis to find the ones that are best for you nutritionally. See the tables and *Best choices* in each category for details. Generally, for everyday eating you're looking for a cereal that's high in:

■ **Carbohydrates and fibre** — providing fuel to get you through the morning, both physically and mentally. Adults should be aiming for about 30 g of fibre in a day, and a high-fibre breakfast cereal is a good starting point. Do our fibre quiz, below right, to see if you're getting enough.

But you also want your cereal to be not too high in:

■ **Fat** (fortunately the fat content of most cereals is minimal).

■ **Sugar** — added sugar can displace more nutritious ingredients and just provide 'empty calories', so sugary cereals are best eaten in moderation.

■ **Sodium** — we're all advised to limit our sodium intake. Most dietary sodium comes from salt in processed foods, including breakfast cereals.

Breakfast cereals often contain added minerals (such as iron) and vitamins (mainly B vitamins), which can make a useful contribution to your diet. Folate, for example, is important for women of childbearing age because it can help reduce the risk of having a baby with neural tube defects like spina bifida, and fortified cereal can be a good source (see our *Folate* report in CHOICE, November 2004). But as so many cereals have vitamins and minerals added, it's more useful to look at fibre, fat, sugar and sodium content when comparing them.

BEST CHOICES

More than a third of the 150 breakfast cereals we reviewed (not including the mueslis) are 'high' or 'very high' in fibre. Of these, just over 40 don't have too much fat, sugar or salt, so are good, healthy choices. See the *Breakfast cereals* table (page 10) — any cereal in the 'high' or 'very high' fibre category that doesn't have a ✕ for fat, sugar or sodium is a good option.

The cereals that tend to be high in fibre are **wheat biscuits, wholegrain cereals and bran cereals**. Just check carefully when choosing bran ones — three of the saltiest cereals we found are all bran-based.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Brekky biggies: our verdict

These are the 10 top-selling breakfast cereals in Australia. Considering that we wouldn't recommend four of them for everyday eating and a further three we'd only rate as OK, it's lucky that we have many more to choose from on our supermarket shelves.

Taking into account fat, sugar and sodium as well as fibre content, we've rated them:

- 👍 = good choice.
- 👎 = OK = not bad, but there are better choices.
- 👎👎 = not recommended for everyday eating.

Brand	Market share, volume (%) [*]	Our rating
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix	17.5	👍
KELLOGG'S Nutri-Grain	7.9	👎👎
KELLOGG'S Corn Flakes	6.6	👎👎
KELLOGG'S Just Right	6.4	OK
UNCLE TOBYS Vita Brits	5.6	👍
KELLOGG'S Coco Pops	5.2	👎👎
UNCLE TOBYS Flakes Plus	4.4	OK
KELLOGG'S Sultana Bran	3.7	👍
KELLOGG'S Special K	3.1	OK
KELLOGG'S Rice Bubbles	2.4	👎👎

^{*} Market share figures are from Retail World's Australasian Grocery Guide 2004.

WHAT WE WANT FOR BREAKFAST

Over 800 people responded to our online poll, asking "What's important to you in choosing a breakfast cereal?" The votes went to:

- Healthy choice (high fibre, low fat, low sugar): 60%
- Taste and texture: 22%
- Quality ingredients: 9%
- Keeping others in the household happy: 6%
- Price: 2%
- Added vitamins and minerals: 1%



Are you getting enough fibre?

Try our quiz to find out how much fibre you're eating. Adults should eat around 30 grams a day, while children need their age plus 5–10 grams per day. Adults and children alike should get their fibre from a variety of foods.

Your daily consumption

	Serves per day	x	Fibre per serve (g)	=	Fibre eaten (g)
Vegetables: 1 serve = ½ cup cooked vegetables, or one cup salad = 2 g fibre		x	2	=	
Fruit: 1 serve = 1 whole fruit, ½ cup berries or diced fruit, ¼ cup dried fruit (fruit juice doesn't count) = 2.5 g fibre		x	2.5	=	
Beans, peas, lentils: 1 serve = ½ cup cooked = 5 g fibre		x	5	=	
Nuts, seeds: 1 serve = ¼ cup, or 1 tablespoon peanut butter = 3 g fibre		x	3	=	
Whole grains: 1 serve = 1 slice wholemeal or high-fibre bread, ½ cup cooked wholemeal or high-fibre pasta or brown rice = 2 g fibre		x	2	=	
Refined grains: 1 serve = 1 slice white bread, ½ cup cooked pasta or rice = 1 g fibre		x	1	=	
Breakfast cereals: 1 serve = ? g fibre (see the tables for the fibre content of your cereal. Figures there are shown as fibre per 100 g (%), so you'll need to calculate from that how much fibre is in a serve, the amount of which is shown in the first column of the table). For example, SANITARIUM Weet-Bix has a serve size of 30 g and a fibre content of 11%. For the calculation, ? = 30 x 11 ÷ 100 = 3.3 g fibre per serve.		x	?	=	

TOTAL FIBRE EATEN DAILY =

FOOD: Breakfast cereals

BREAKFAST CEREALS

1 & 2 Brand and serve size (g), in order of fibre content	3 Fibre (%)	4 Energy (kJ per serve)	5 High fat	6 High sugar	7 High sodium
BISCUITS AND BITES					
High fibre					
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix Hi Bran (40, 2 biscuits)	18.3	584			
UNCLE TOBYS Shredded Wheat (23.5, 1 biscuit)	13.2	350			
SANITARIUM Lite-Bix (30, 2 biscuits)	12.2	444			
UNCLE TOBYS Vita Brits (34, 2 biscuits)	11.9	500			
UNCLE TOBYS Vita Brits Organic (31.25, 2 biscuits)	11.9	500			
KELLOGG'S Mini-Wheats Whole Wheat (30)	11.6	444			
BI-LO Wheat Biscuits (30)	11	441			
BLACK & GOLD Breakfast Wheat Biscuits (30)	11	441			
COLES FARMLAND Wholewheat Biscuits (30, 2 biscuits)	11	441			
COLES Organic Whole Grain Wheat Biscuits (30, 2 biscuits)	11	450			
FRANKLINS NO FRILLS Wheat Biscuits (30, 2 biscuits)	11	441			
GOLDENVALE Wheat Biscuits (30, 2 biscuits) (Aldi)	11	441			
HOME BRAND Wheat Biscuits (30, 2 biscuits)	11	441			
IGA ActiveStart Wheat Biscuits (30, 2 biscuits)	11	441			
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix (30, 2 biscuits)	11	444			
Moderate fibre					
SANITARIUM Good Start (48, 2 biscuits)	9.3	758			
KELLOGG'S Mini-Wheats Blackcurrant Flavour (30)	9.2	434			
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Wild Berry (40)	8.9	576			
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix Crunch (35)	8.8	532			
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Apricot (40)	8.6	584			
UNCLE TOBYS OT's Fruity Bites Apricot Flavour (35)	7.2	520		X (A)	
UNCLE TOBYS OT's Fruity Bites Wildberry Flavour (35)	7.2	520			
BRAN					
Very high fibre					
UNCLE TOBYS Bran Plus (45)	45.4	550			
BI-LO Just Bran (30)	36.2	402		XX	
COLES Bran Start (30)	36.2	402		XX	
GOLDENVALE Just Bran (30) (Aldi)	36.2	401		XX	
KELLOGG'S All-Bran (45)	27.5	629			
High fibre					
KELLOGG'S Body Smart Fruit 'n' Oats (45)	19.6	642			
UNCLE TOBYS Plus Sultanas 'n' Bran (45)	14.3	670		X (A)	
KELLOGG'S Body Smart WheatBran Flakes (30)	14.2	449			
KELLOGG'S Sultana Bran (45)	14.2	639			
UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for Heart (45)	13.8			X (A)	
ABUNDANT EARTH Organic Start Raisin Bran (40)	13.2	560		X (A)	
LOWAN OatBran & Fruit (50)	11	555			

1 & 2 Brand and serve size (g), in order of fibre content	3 Fibre (%)	4 Energy (kJ per serve)	5 High fat	6 High sugar	7 High sodium
FLAKES, ETC					
Very high fibre					
KELLOGG'S Body Smart Guardian (30)	21.2	432			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Optimum Power (55)	21	782			
High fibre					
NATURE'S PATH Organic Heritage (30)	18.3	420			
UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for Bowel & Digestive System (45)	18.1	660			
CARB OPTIONS Crunchy Vanilla Nut (45)	16.6	779		X	
CARB OPTIONS Apple & Cinnamon (45)	16.4	779		X	
NATURE'S PATH Organic Optimum Zen (55)	16.4	660			
UNCLE TOBYS Plus Fibre Mix (45)	14.3	660			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Pumpkin Flax Plus Granol (30)	13.3	588		X	X
WEIGHT WATCHERS Fruit & Fibre (30)	13.1	400			
IGA ActiveStart Wheat Flakes (30)	12.8	390			
UNCLE TOBYS Weeties (30)	12.8	390			
BI-LO Wheat Flakes (30)	12	456			
NORGANIC Crunchola Apple Blueberry (30)	11.7	419			
NORGANIC Crunchola Apple Cinnamon (30)	11.7	419			
NATURE'S SOURCE Strawberry & Yoghurt (30)	11.3	471		X	
NATURE'S SOURCE Toasted Nut Crunch (30)	11.3	452		X	
NATURE'S SOURCE Tropical Cluster (30)	11.2	464		X	
ABUNDANT EARTH Organic Start Golden Flax (50)	11.1	800			
FREEDOM FOODS Corn Flakes with Psyllium (50) (B)	10.9	742			
UNCLE TOBYS Weeties Fruit 'n' Nut (45)	10.7	620			
ABUNDANT EARTH Organic Start Fibre 7 (32)	10.2	450			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Heritage O's (30)	10	462			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Oaty Bites (30)	10	504			
Moderate fibre					
COLES FARMLAND Sultana Crunch (50)	9.8	685			
GOLDENVALE Sultana Flakes (45) (Aldi)	9.8	657			
UNCLE TOBYS Plus Muesli Flakes (45)	9.6	680			
UNCLE TOBYS Plus Sports Lift (45)	9.5	680			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Millet Rice Oatbran (30)	9	493			
KELLOGG'S Just Right Fruit 'n' Flakes (40)	8.9	635			
BI-LO Corn Flakes (30)	8.8	474			X
BLACK & GOLD Corn Flakes (30)	8.8	470			X
COLES FARMLAND Corn Flakes (30)	8.8	459			X
FRANKLINS NO FRILLS Corn Flakes (30)	8.8	470			X
IGA ActiveStart Corn Flakes (30)	8.8	470			X
PURINA Kornie Corn Flakes (30)	8.8	470			X
FREEDOM FOODS Hi-Lite (40)	8.5	503			
KELLOGG'S Just Right Original (45)	8.5	669			X (A)
KELLOGG'S Sustain Selection (45)	8.5	713			

1 & 2 Brand and serve size (g), in order of fibre content	3 Fibre (%)	4 Energy (kJ per serve)	5 High fat	6 High sugar	7 High sodium
COLES FARMLAND Right Start (45)	8.4	684			
FREEDOM FOODS Rice Flakes with Psyllium (50) (B)	8.2	749			
UNCLE TOBYS Nut Feast (45)	8.2	750			
GOLDENVALE Special Flakes (30) (Aldi)	8	476			
WEIGHT WATCHERS Tropicana (30)	7.8	410			
KELLOGG'S Just Right Just Grains (45)	7.7	698			
COLES Wheat Flakes (30)	7.3	477			
UNCLE TOBYS Oat Flakes (30)	7.3	500			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Corn Flakes (30) (B)	7	493			
SANITARIUM Light 'n' Tasty Apricot (30)	7	447			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Ginger Zing Granola (30)	6.7	630	X		
NATURE'S PATH Organic Spelt Flakes (30)	6.7	493			
SANITARIUM Puffed Wheat (30)	6.7	465			
GOLDENVALE Balanced Right (30) (Aldi)	6.5	456			
DICK SMITH FOODS Bush Foods Breakfast (30)	6.4	462			
KELLOGG'S Sustain Original (45)	6.4	705			
SANITARIUM Light 'n' Tasty Berry (30)	6	441			
NATURE'S PATH Organic Mesa Sunrise (30) (B)	5.9	497			
SANITARIUM Granola (30)	5.9	501			X
HOME BRAND Corn Flakes (30)	5.3	420			X
WHOLE EARTH Organic Corn Flakes (50)	5	763			X
Low fibre					
GOLDENVALE Power Grain (30) (Aldi)	4.9	484		X	
UNCLE TOBYS OT's Loops Original Flavour (40)	4.7	660		X	
UNCLE TOBYS Plus Crisp'n Crunchy (45)	4.4	710			
UNCLE TOBYS Plus Lite Start (45)	4.3	720			
GOLDENVALE Corn Flakes (30) (Aldi)	4	450			X
UNCLE TOBYS OT's Squares Original Flavour (40)	4	670		X	
KELLOGG'S Special K Apple & a Hint of Cinnamon (30)	3.9	471			X (A)
UNCLE TOBYS OT's Squares Honey (40)	3.9	660		X	
BI-LO Crunchy Grain (30)	3.7	490			
COLES FARMLAND Crunchy Grain (30) (C)	3.7	490			
KELLOGG'S Nutri-Grain Smash (30)	3.1	492		X	
SANITARIUM Skippy Corn Flakes (30)	3.1	459			X
COLES Honey Crunch Corn Flakes (50)	3	751		X	
FREEDOM FOODS Ultra-Rice with Psyllium (50) (B)	2.9	780			
KELLOGG'S Special K Peach & Apricot (30)	2.9	479			
KELLOGG'S Nutri-Grain (30)	2.7	479		X	X
KELLOGG'S Corn Flakes (30)	2.6	475			XX
KELLOGG'S Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes (30)	2.5	504		X	
KELLOGG'S Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes Butterscotch (30)	2.5	504		X	
KELLOGG'S Special K (30)	2.5	472			
NORGANIC Organic Corn Flakes (55) (B)	1.7	794			

1 & 2 Brand and serve size (g), in order of fibre content	3 Fibre (%)	4 Energy (kJ per serve)	5 High fat	6 High sugar	7 High sodium
SOY					
Very high fibre					
VOGEL'S Ultra Bran Soy & Linseed (45)	31.2	595			
NUTRITIOUS LIVING Hi-Lo (30)	20	378			ns
High fibre					
VOGEL'S Vita Pro Gluten Free (45) (B)	18.1	660			
VOGEL'S SoyTana (45)	15.9	630		X (A)	
UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for Women 40+ (45)	10.8	680			
NUTRITIOUS LIVING 40.30.30 (40)	10	630	X		ns
Moderate fibre					
LOWAN MultiFlakes with Fruit & Nuts (45)	8.3	684			
LOWAN MultiFlakes with Tropical Fruit (45)	7.4	639			

Any cereal in the 'very high' or 'high' fibre category that doesn't have a X for fat, sugar or sodium is a good choice.

ns Not specified on the packaging.

(A) Sugar from fruit contributes to the total.

(B) Labelled as gluten-free.

(C) Will be changing supplier.

1 Brand

During September/October 2004 we scored supermarkets in Sydney and bought 150 ready-to-eat cereals, and over 30 high-fibre mueslis.

2 Serve size

This is the serving size in grams suggested by the manufacturer.

3 Fibre

We rated the fibre levels as follows:

■ **Very high fibre:** at least 20% fibre (6 g of fibre in a 30 g serve).

■ **High fibre:** 10–19.9% fibre (3–5.9 g in a 30 g serve).

■ **Moderate fibre:** 5–9.9% fibre (1.5–2.9 g in a 30 g serve).

■ **Low fibre:** Less than 5% fibre — not recommended as an everyday cereal.

4 Energy

We used the manufacturer's recommended serve size to calculate the energy in kilojoules that you'll get from your breakfast (not including milk). Some mueslis don't have a suggested serve size; in this case we used a typical serve of 50 g.

5 High fat

X More than 9% fat: more than 2.7 g in a 30 g serve.

In the *Muesli* table (page 13) their fat content is listed rather than rated, as they're naturally higher in what's often reasonably healthy unsaturated fat (see *Muesli munch*, page 13, for more details).

6 High sugar

X 27% to 40% sugar: two to three teaspoons in a 30 g serve.

XX More than 40% sugar: more than three teaspoons in a 30 g serve.

7 High sodium

X 600–800 mg sodium per 100 g cereal, which amounts to 20–27% of the lower recommended daily sodium intake for adults in a 30 g serve, and up to 50% for kids aged between four and seven.

XX More than 800 mg of sodium per 100 g of cereal.

KIDS COP IT

Kids get a raw deal with breakfast cereals. Most kids' cereals are so highly processed they no longer resemble the grain they started out as. The majority are low in fibre, and either too sugary or too salty.

We put the cereals marketed at kids into a separate table to compare them (see right). Out of all the breakfast cereals in both it and the table for general breakfast cereals (page 10), the eight most sugary ones are all aimed at kids, all with the equivalent of two to three teaspoons (10–15 g) of sugar in a 30 g serve (about ¾–1 cup).

MARKETING MADNESS

Most advertising for kids' food used to be all about the taste and the fun kids could have eating it. But with a continuing demand from parents for healthy choices, the emphasis is changing. Take KELLOGG'S *Coco Pops*, for example. A recent ad draws parents' attention to the added vitamins and minerals it contains, and would have you believe it's practically a health food.

But many other cereals also have added vitamins and minerals. And while sales figures for KELLOGG'S *Coco Pops* may be healthy (see *Brekkie biggies: our verdict*, page 9), it's over one third sugar. We give it the thumbs-down as a healthy choice — with or without its added vitamins and minerals.

A subsequent KELLOGG'S promotion also caught our attention, for sending an unhealthy message to kids. In celebration of the cinema release of the movie *Shrek 2*, KELLOGG'S cereals came with sachets of Shrek 'pop rocks' — sugary 'popping candy' — to sprinkle over your cereal. Sure, it's fun. But considering that over half the kids' cereals we looked at are already high in sugar, the last thing we need to be doing is encouraging kids to add more. Thumbs-down again from us.

BEST CHOICES

Kids don't need as much fibre as adults, but they should still eat a cereal with a 'high' or 'moderate' amount, and not too much fat, sugar or salt. NATURE'S PATH ENVIROKIDZ Organic Gorilla Munch and SANITARIUM Honey Weets are your best options from our kids' cereals category. But in fact a lot of options from the *Breakfast cereals* table are better choices. Kids can even add a teaspoon of sugar to them and still get a more nutritious start to the day.

While sales figures for Kellogg's Coco Pops may be healthy, they're over one third sugar. We give them the thumbs-down as a healthy choice.

KIDS' CEREALS

1 & 2 Brand and serve size (g), in order of fibre content	3 Fibre (%)	4 Energy (kJ per serve)	5 High fat	6 High sugar	7 High sodium
Moderate fibre					
NATURE'S PATH ENVIROKIDZ Organic Koala Crisp (30) (A)	6	485		X	
NATURE'S PATH ENVIROKIDZ Organic Gorilla Munch (30) (A)	5.9	493			
LOWAN Honey O's (35)	5.8	473		XX	
SANITARIUM Honey Weets (30)	5.5	465			
Low fibre					
IGA Fruity Hoops (30)	4.3	498		XX	
NEW DAY Fruity Rings (30) (Aldi)	4.3	492		X	
BI-LO Frooty Rings (30)	3.5	492		X	
COLES FARMLAND Frooty Rings (30)	3.5	492		X	
FRANKLINS NO FRILLS Fruit Rings (30)	3.5	487		XX	
HOME BRAND Fruiti Rings (30)	3.5	492		X	
NEW DAY Choco Rice (30) (Aldi)	2.6	485		XX	
KELLOGG'S Froot Loops (30)	2.4	491		XX	
BI-LO Rice Pops (30)	2.2	465			X
COLES FARMLAND Rice Puffs (30)	2.2	465		X	
NEW DAY Breakfast Bubbles (30) (Aldi)	2.2	465		X	
SANITARIUM Skippy Ricles (30)	2.2	465			X
IGA ActiveStart Coco Orbits (35) (A)	2	532			
FRANKLINS NO FRILLS Rice Pops (30)	1.9	491			
HOME BRAND Rice Pops (30)	1.7	462			XX
KELLOGG'S Crispix (30)	1.5	487			X
KELLOGG'S Frosties (30)	1.5	484		XX	
KELLOGG'S Coco Pops (30)	1.2	481		X	
KELLOGG'S Rice Bubbles (30)	1.1	481			X
BI-LO Coco Puffs (30)	0.44	489		X	X
COLES FARMLAND Cocoa Puffs (30)	0.44	444		XX	
HOME BRAND Cocoa Puffs (30)	0.44	495		XX	

(A) Labelled as gluten-free.

See page 11 for notes 1–7.



MUESLI MUNCH

As with breakfast cereals, a high-fibre muesli that isn't too high in sugar, fat or salt is preferable. But let's face it: you're not going to feel inspired to eat something that tastes like a combination of birdseed and cardboard, no matter how much fibre and other goodness it contains. So to help out, we bought all the high-fibre (10% or more) mueslis we could find and put them to the test to find the tastiest.

Muesli tend to be intrinsically higher in fat than other cereals. However, it's mainly the 'good' unsaturated type from the oats, seeds and nuts they invariably contain, so you don't need to steer

clear just because of the fat content. If a muesli has 10% fat or more, check the ingredients list to see where the fat comes from — the higher up the ingredients list the nuts and seeds are, the better.

BEST CHOICES

Most of the high-fibre mueslis we looked at are good breakfast choices. They're low in sodium and (except for one) don't contain too much sugar. In our taste test, **NAYTURA Premium Muesli** (available from Woolworths) was most successful at tantalising the taste buds of our trialists.

MUESLI

1 & 2 Brand and serve size (g), in order of overall taste test score	Overall taste test score (%)	3 Fibre (%)	4 Energy (kJ per serve)	5 Fat (%)
NAYTURA Premium (60)	79	10.0	993	9.0
MERIRAM Natural Low Fat (40)	75	10.0	541	2.6
SOLAND Natural Low Fat (40)	75	10.1	541	2.5
MONSTER MUESLI Tropical with Mango & Macadamia (60)	74	10.3	878	8.8
SUNSOL Low Fat Natural (40)	69	10.0	541	2.6
BI-LO Tropical Fruit (50)	67	13.1	801	6.2
LOWAN Swiss (50)	67	12.7	713	7.4
THE MUESLI COMPANY Premium (50)	66	11.2	785	7.9
COLES FARMLAND Tropical (50)	65	13.1	712	4.3
HEALTHIERIES Wheat & Gluten Free Apricot & Coconut (70)	65	15.2	1060	13.2
MORNING SUN Natural Apricot & Almond (60)	65	12.4	890	7.0
MONSTER MUESLI Blackberry with Kiwi Fruit (60)	64	10.4	871	7.8
MONSTER MUESLI Hi-fibre (60)	63	13.6	857	7.7
CARMAN'S Classic Fruit (45)	62	10.4	816	20.6
FRANKLIN'S NO FRILLS Tropical (40)	61	11.2	570	5.4
SANDRA CABOT'S High Protein High Fibre (50)	61	18.0	753	9.3
NU-VIT Mega High Protein with Amaranth (40)	60	10.2	613	10.9
ARNOLD'S FARM Wild Berry (60)	59	10.2	990	6.2
MONSTER MUESLI Sports Original Recipe (60)	59	10.5	886	8.9
GOLDENVALE Premium Fruit & Nut (40) (Aldi) (A)	58	11.3	631	10.0
MORNING SUN Natural Peach & Pecan (60)	58	12.0	1080	7.0
NORGANIC Rolled Oat Apricot & Almonds with Added Psyllium (30)	57	10.2	753	7.3
UNCLE TOBYS Natural Swiss (60)	57	11.1	910	6.6
BI-LO Apricot & Almond (50)	55	13.2	810	6.1
NICOLA'S ORGANICS Organic Maple Almond Toasted (50)	52	10.0	910	14.0
ORGRAN Lite & Crunchy Fruit & Almond (40)	51	10.2	694	23.0
LOWAN Original Recipe Natural (50)	50	10.1	642	7.3
MORNING SUN Natural Date & Hazelnut (60)	49	10.0	930	8.3
FREEDOM FOODS Gluten Free Wheat Free with Psyllium (40)	47	18.3	764	27.2 (B)
HEALTHIERIES Bircher Berry & Apple (65)	46	35.0	897	10.5
BYRON BAY Macadamia Natural Bircher Style (50)	44	10.2	950	16.5
ENERGY FIELDS Vital Start (30)	44	16.3	567	19.0
WILLOWVALE ORGANICS Organic Spelt (100)	43	13.3	1450	3.0

- (A) High in sugar, although sugar from fruit contributes to the total.
 (B) Almost half the fat is saturated.

See page 11 for notes 1–5.

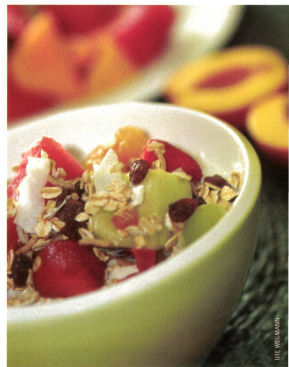
MUESLI TASTE TEST

471 CHOICE subscribers tasted 33 brands of high-fibre (10% or more) muesli. Each trialist tasted three brands, and each brand was tasted by 34 to 45 trialists. The trialists weren't told which muesli brands they were testing. Thanks to everyone who took part.

Overall taste test score

Trialists scored the mueslis for taste, texture and appearance. The overall taste test score was made up as follows:

- Taste: 40%
- Texture: 40%
- Appearance: 20%



You're not going to feel inspired to eat a muesli that tastes like a combination of birdseed and cardboard, no matter how much fibre and other goodness it contains. So we put all the high-fibre mueslis we could find to the test to find the tastiest.

SMALL WIN WITH CREDIT FILES

Over a year ago 50 CHOICE subscribers asked for a copy of their credit file from Baycorp Advantage, the main company that keeps credit files. Thirty per cent of the files had one or more mistakes in them. These files are used by your bank and other lenders to determine whether you're a good credit risk. An inaccurate record can mean you're refused credit.

We're still concerned about the lack of proper consumer safeguards and are still calling for an overhaul of the credit reporting system. However, we can report one small win.

The Privacy Commissioner has now found that One.Tel, the telecommunications company in liquidation, didn't have systems in place to update its lists of customers who'd defaulted on a debt but then later paid. As a result Baycorp Advantage has removed 65,000 listings made by One.Tel from its database.

We look forward to the day when there's an appropriate external dispute resolution scheme for credit reporting, and an onus on a credit provider to inform a consumer when it places an adverse listing on their file.

Don't get skimmed by scamsters



TAMARA CROFT

Joel from Sydney was puzzled when he received a call from a customer service officer at his credit union, asking if he'd made an EFTPOS transaction at a service station in Sydney's south.

"When I said I'd used the petrol station, she told me my card had been compromised and they'd send me a new one," says Joel.

His card had been 'skimmed' by criminals, and once the skimming device had been detected his credit union was contacting all members whose cards had been used at that service station. He was lucky no unauthorised transactions had been made.

A skimming device, about the size of a pager or mobile phone, is used to capture the information from your card's magnetic strip. The device is usually placed close to the legitimate EFTPOS card machine at a retail counter (such as in a petrol station or restaurant) and looks similar to it.

The device saves the information, which is then used to create an illegal copy of your card. The fraudster then uses the fake card to make unauthorised transactions that you'll get the bill for.

Skimming devices have also been found attached to ATMs to record PINs and card information.

Use the following tips to protect yourself against card fraud:

- Don't tell anyone your PIN and don't keep a record of it, especially anywhere near your card.
- Check your statements regularly and contact your bank immediately if you notice an unauthorised transaction.
- Keep a record in a safe place of your credit and debit card details and of your financial institution's emergency number. If your card is lost or stolen, the faster you provide your bank with details the better.
- Make sure your card is returned immediately by the salesperson after completing a purchase. Sometimes cards are intentionally retained to commit fraud.
- Dispose of credit and debit card receipts securely so the information can't be retrieved. They sometimes disclose your account number, particularly EFTPOS receipts.
- If possible, don't let your card out of sight. For example, don't hand your card to a waiter in a restaurant — go to the counter to pay your bill.

IS YOUR BANK A HARE OR A TORTOISE?

How quickly does your bank respond when you send an email? Does it take hours or weeks to answer your questions?

AC Nielsen Consulting sends anonymous emails to 23 financial institutions each month to test how quickly and thoroughly they provide answers to consumer questions.

The best five banks and credit unions in the latest *Thoroughness of Reply Index* for 2004 were:

- Community First CU: 72%.
- mecu: 70%.
- Westpac: 68%.
- Bank of Queensland: 64%.
- Adelaide Bank: 61%.



WANT MORE MONEY INFO?

CHOICE *Money & Rights* magazine is published six times a year and contains more information on money topics (and your consumer rights) than we could ever fit into CHOICE. To subscribe call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.



Flamin' great?

They're popular for al fresco restaurant dining, but will an outdoor gas heater work in your backyard?



No winter's trip to Melbourne would be complete without dinner or coffee on Lygon or Ackland Street, probably nestled under an outdoor gas heater. But have you ever wondered how one would go in your backyard? That's what they're being sold for now, so — figuring you probably don't want to pay restaurant-model prices — we tested all the heaters we could find for less than \$800.

We bought the heaters just coming out of winter, but they're useful for cool evenings in spring and autumn too, so you should be able to buy one most of the year.

HEATING YOU UP

These heaters work by the heat transfer process of radiation — they transfer heat directly to you without heating the air between, just like the sun on a cold day. Our test rig measured temperature rises generated by the radiant energy at approximately head, waist and foot height, at various distances away from the heater.

Stand too close to these heaters and you'll cook — temperatures rose by over 70°C at head height for most models at half a metre. But temperatures fall dramatically as you move away from the heater, so the effective range is fairly limited. There's not a great difference between models in this respect — all are best between one and 1.5 metres away. Just how many guests this could keep warm depends on where

you place it, but about eight guests could sit around one at this distance.

And, at this distance, the difference in temperature between head and foot height is acceptable, so you shouldn't suffer from 'hot head, cold feet' syndrome.

Warmth can still be felt further away, but at about three metres all the heaters raise temperatures by only a few degrees — still welcome on a cold night, but probably not enough to make you feel entirely comfortable.

HOTTER IS BETTER

The COLEMAN and MASPORT models achieved the largest overall temperature increases at the various measured distances. The weakest heating performance (the COMPANION's) wasn't bad and would still keep you warm close to it, but would struggle more on a cold night.

For example, at one metre away the COLEMAN was able to raise temperatures by 22°C, 23°C and 12°C at head, waist and foot heights (the MASPORT performed similarly), while the COMPANION managed rises of 15°C, 14°C and 7°C respectively.

IN A NUTSHELL

- All the models tested do a reasonable job, but our top performers definitely give out more heat than the others.
- Even so, you and your guests will have to sit fairly close to the heater to keep warm.
- They go through a fair bit of gas, so frequent use could get expensive.

WHAT TO BUY

COLEMAN 5040A751A	\$699
MASPORT Ultimate Deluxe PH04 TEST BUY	\$349
AIRA Ultra Buddy UB47 TEST BUY	\$299

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS		
	1 Overall score (%)	2 Heating performance score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	4 Gas consumption (g / hour)	Light	Protective cover	Ignition type	Weight (kg)*	4 Claimed heat output (MJ / h)	Wa (yes)
COLEMAN 5040A751A	83	89	68	850 (C)	✓		Electronic (battery)	43	42	7
MASPORT Ultimate Deluxe PH04 (A)	81	88	65	1028		✓	Piezo	31	49.5	1
AIRA Ultra Buddy UB47	79	83	68	940			Piezo	23	46	1
MAXIHEAT Sierra MXOPH2P A/B (B)	73	78	60	796			Piezo	24	38	1
GASMATE PH900	71	74	65	722			Piezo	16	37	1
JUMBUCK JM7015104	67	68	65	646			Piezo	14	37	1
GARDEN FLAME SV01	65	64	68	712			Piezo	23	38.6	1
COMPANION COMP703	65	61	75	702		✓	Piezo	19	40	1

WHERE WILL YOU KEEP IT?

These heaters could pose a storage challenge for some households. Unless you have a garage that isn't already chockers or buy a heater with a cover, you'll have to figure out where to put your tall (around 2.3 m) and heavy lump of metal. At this height, it's unlikely to fit inside most garden sheds, so do you have somewhere else to put it, or will you have to leave it outside in the weather?

It makes sense to choose a hotter model as it's more likely to cope with colder conditions and can always be turned down if too hot.

RUNNING COSTS

We measured the gas consumption of the heaters with the burner on full. Based on these measurements, the heaters tested could run on full for nine to 14 hours using a standard 9 kg gas bottle. Factoring in a typical cost of gas bottle refills (\$20), the tested heaters cost around \$1.40 to \$2.30 per hour to run at full steam.

Besides disturbing the neighbours and the nocturnal habits of local wildlife, a wild party at your place could easily empty a full 9 kg bottle of gas. \$20 isn't much for a special occasion, but if you use an outdoor gas heater more regularly the cost could begin to pinch.

EASY TO USE?

Most of the heaters are easy to ignite: turn a knob around to the pilot light position, press a button, rotate the knob to ignite the burner, and warmth should be yours. However, it was difficult to see when the pilot light had lit on the **COLEMAN**, **MASPORT** and **MAXIHEAT** models, a slight annoyance with otherwise good heaters.

The **COLEMAN** is also the only model with electronic (battery) ignition, which is more convenient to use than the mechanical piezo one-press, one-spark system used on all the other models. One press should get the **COLEMAN** flaming — with the others you might need to push the piezo ignition button several times before it lights (particularly after replacing an empty gas bottle).

Manoeuvrability is another factor to consider: most models weigh around the 20 kg mark (without the gas bottle) and most have two wheels to aid movement. However, the **MASPORT** and **COLEMAN** are substantially heavier at 31 kg and 43 kg respectively. If you had to move these heaters up steps it would be a difficult job.

POTENTIAL DANGERS

When gas, flame and heat are present, there's always some danger lurking.

- Don't use them near combustible materials. All the heaters' instructions warn against this, and generally recommend clearances of at least 60 cm at the sides and rear and 50 cm above — but if you have shade cloth above, two models suggest 2.5 m clearance.
- You can't use these heaters in enclosed spaces (such as your garage) due to their production of poisonous carbon monoxide gas. Check and follow the manufacturer's ventilation guidelines if you're likely to use your heater in a semi-enclosed space.
- There's also the possibility of a gas leak every time a gas bottle is connected. You can check for one by brushing the joints with a soap solution and looking for bubbles.
- The risk of burning yourself by touching a hot surface on these heaters is very low. None of the areas likely to be touched during use got excessively hot during our testing. However, the burner and the reflector can reach several hundred degrees, so be careful near them.
- During our testing, none of the heaters appeared unstable when fitted with a gas bottle. All would require a substantial knock to cause them to topple over — but just in case, all models are fitted with a gas cutout switch that turns the burner off if it does fall.
- Although the **GASMATE** and **JUMBUCK** (which look as if they're the same heater with different names) have wheels, when they're tilted onto these the gas bottle (which is only held in place by a strap around it) can fall over, causing the gas hose to bear the weight of the loose gas bottle. This could lead to hose damage, with disastrous results. If you already own one of these models, be careful moving it and check for hose damage periodically.

Manufacturer / distributor	Price (\$)**
Coleman Brands	699
Masport	349
Aira	299
Barbeques Galore	299
Sitro Group	229
Bunnings	229
Cape Trading Sales	399
Bromic	499

* Without gas bottle; rounded to the nearest kg.

** Recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in December 2004.

(A) To be discontinued in March.

(B) According to the manufacturer this model will be discontinued in April and replaced with a new model.

(C) 916 g/hour with the light on.

1 Overall score

- Heating performance score: 70%
- Ease of use score: 30%

2 Heating performance score

Our test rig had temperature probes to measure radiant energy. We measured temperatures at distances of 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5 and 3 m, and at three different heights: 1.7 m (head height), 1.1 m (waist or mid height, approximately head height when seated) and 0.18 m (foot height). Readings were taken every 10 seconds until temperatures had stabilised, and the temperature measurements were repeated five times. We added together the temperature rises

in the 1.0 to 2.5 m distance range and converted the number to a temperature performance score.

3 Ease of use score

Four aspects were assessed: ease of ignition, moving the heater, fitting the gas bottle and ease of using the controls. All were weighted equally.

4 Gas consumption/claimed heat output

Models with a higher claimed heat output ought to warm you up more, and are likely to use more gas. This was generally the case for the models in our test. However, other design factors contribute to performance too so it's not a guarantee.

Profiles

Heaters in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in December 2004.

COLEMAN 5040A751A

Price: \$699

GOOD POINTS

- Very good heating performance.
- Electronic ignition.
- Gas light.

BAD POINTS

- Very heavy.
- Difficult to see when the pilot light has lit.



MASPORT ULTIMATE DELUXE PH04

Price: \$349

GOOD POINTS

- Very good heating performance.
- Protective cover supplied.
- Has a small wooden table surrounding the pole — convenient, but not so good for a cold beer.

BAD POINTS

- The highest gas consumption in the test.
- Very heavy.
- Difficult to see when the pilot light has lit.



AIRA ULTRA BUDDY UB47

Price: \$299

GOOD POINTS

- Very good heating performance.

BAD POINTS

- No wheels, so it's not as easy to move as other models.



What to look for

- If you're likely to move the heater around, wheels will make it easier. Try moving it in the shop to check that it's stable and rolls easily. If you'll have to move it up steps, look for one that's not too heavy.
- The gas bottle should be easy to fit and should stay securely in place if you tilt the heater when moving it.
- The heater should be stable and not easily knocked over, and should have an automatic gas cutout in case it is.
- It should be easy to ignite. Battery-operated electronic ignition is easier than mechanical piezo ignition.
- The controls should be easy to grip and well labelled.
- Models with a higher heat rating (in MJ/h) will generally warm you more (and use more gas — those in our test did), although many other design factors influence this too.

SERVICE CALLS

During testing we found that the **MASPORT** and **AIRA** models had faulty ignition buttons, meaning we had to resort to using matches to get them lit — not very desirable.

So we placed service calls. The manufacturer of the **AIRA** responded promptly, and the problem was fixed with no further hassle.

With **MASPORT**, it took three follow-up phone calls and a written reminder before service personnel arrived and the problem was easily fixed.

If you buy a heater that seems difficult to light it's worth getting it serviced — generally it's an easy fix and makes using the heater much more of a pleasure.

Want to get pay TV but don't know your choices? We explain the basics — your options, the costs and what's involved.

PAY TV: your questions answered

IN A NUTSHELL

■ If you have a choice of pay TV providers in your area, check their offerings carefully. The channels may be very similar, but their packages and pricing can vary.

■ Although pay TV offers up to seven movie channels, only one provider includes one in the basic subscription package. With the others, and for the rest of the movie channels, you have to pay extra.

Nothing worthwhile again on the box tonight? You might have five or six free-to-air television channels to choose from, but the offerings are often mediocre or worse, especially during non-ratings periods. So what about pay TV? For a monthly subscription fee, which depends on the number and variety of channels you choose, it's delivered directly to your home by cable or satellite.

Since its introduction in Australia in the mid 1990s, the number of pay TV subscribers has grown to around 1.6 million, or just over 26% of households. If you want to add yours to the statistics but don't know where to start, read on. We've gathered the necessary information to help you make your choice.

Who provides pay TV?

The three major pay TV providers are Foxtel, Optus and Austar. Also see *Other pay TV providers*, page 20.

■ **Foxtel**, jointly owned by Telstra, News Ltd and Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd, is the major and most powerful player on the Australian pay TV scene, with the largest number of subscribers and the widest reach on its cable and satellite networks. Foxtel services the metropolitan cities of Australia including Newcastle, plus the Central Coast (NSW), Gold Coast, Geelong and regional WA.

Foxtel controls most of the programs available on pay TV through ownership or distribution arrangements. Foxtel Digital is also resold through some other telcos (Telstra, AAPT, TransACT — only the satellite service — and, from early 2005, Primus), which 'bundle' pay TV with their other services (see *What 'rewards' for 'service bundling'?*, page 20).

■ **Optus**, owned by Singapore telco SingTel, bundles its pay TV packages with phone and internet services and delivers via its own cable network to customers in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney.

■ **Austar** provides subscription TV, internet and mobile phone services, mainly by satellite, to subscribers in rural and regional centres in eastern Australia, Hobart and Darwin. Austar Digital is also resold through Telstra, Network Communications and Telesavers.

Can I get it anywhere?

The paragraphs above list the area availability for the three major pay TV services. The easiest way to find out whether your area is equipped for Foxtel, Optus or Austar is to do their online postcode search or call them.

Optus TV isn't available in multi-dwelling units (flats). If you want to receive Foxtel or Austar in a unit or townhouse complex, certain infrastructure (cable or satellite) needs to be in place before your



individual unit can be connected, and to get it installed you'll need the approval of the building owner (or of the body corporate, owners' corporation or the like) and, if you're renting, also the landlord.

In some circumstances, units with satellite connection may still not be able to receive Foxtel's and Austar's full satellite service.

Can I choose satellite or cable connection?

No. Optus only delivers by cable, Austar mainly by satellite (only in Darwin by cable) and Foxtel by satellite only where its cable service isn't available.

Can I choose digital or analogue?

It depends on where you live and which supplier you choose. Since March last year, Foxtel and Austar have switched their pay TV services to digital and no longer sell their analogue service; Optus provides an analogue service and hasn't made a decision yet about its digital future.

Both Foxtel and Austar encourage their existing analogue customers to switch their service to digital. You don't need a new TV set, just a new digital set-top box and a return path installed (see *What's involved in installation?*, page 21, for more on this). The upgrade to digital generally incurs a fee, but it was often waived at the time of our research late last year.

Digital pay TV gives you better picture and sound quality, an onscreen digital channel guide, interactivity and a lot more channels to choose from. For example, Foxtel Digital offers access to more than 100 channels, including 10 timeshift channels (which show the same program two hours later) and various interactive ones. Austar Digital has added more than 20 new channels, including interactive ones, and eight time-shift channels, to its repertoire.

With interactive channels (including news and sports) you can give feedback in viewer polls, choose the news item you want to watch when you want to watch it, or watch various angles of a sports broadcast on multiple screens, if available. You can also get access to interactive games and pay-per-view channels such as Box Office (relatively new movies that start every 30 minutes) and Main Event (special sporting or music events that aren't broadcast elsewhere).

Can I choose the channels I want to subscribe to?

No. Unfortunately you can't just pick and choose the channels you'd like to watch; you have to sign up for a package of channels. The providers offer various packages — the more you're prepared to pay each month, the bigger the variety of channels.

The most basic, or 'starter', packages available usually contain some entertainment, news, documentary, sport, music and children's channels plus access to some pay-per-view services. See *What's included in the basic package?*, below, for details. They're designed to appeal to a broad range of interests and tastes.

To this basic offering you can then add additional channel 'tiers' for an extra monthly fee, or you can choose a more comprehensive package from the start. Channel tiers contain certain types of channels and may be grouped in categories such as 'Laughter and Living', 'Fun and Entertainment' and 'Quest and Adventure'. Some movie and special-interest channels can also be bought separately, but only in addition to at least the basic package.

How much does it cost per month?

- **Austar Digital: Essentials** \$44.95; then you can add *General Entertainment Options* (a number of channels per option), \$9.95 for one option, \$14.95 for two, \$19.95 for three; *Movie Options* (two choices, each with several movie channels), \$12.95.
- **Foxtel Digital:** You choose one of: *Digital Basic*, \$49.95; *Big Value*, \$71.90; *Movies and Value* (three options, each with several channels), \$83.85; *Platinum*, \$97.95.
- **Optus TV: Entertainment Pack** \$49.95; then you can add *Entertainment Plus Pack*, \$15.95; *Movies Pack*, \$16.95; *Mega Movies Pack*, \$29.90.

Prices and channels quoted in this article are as of December last year.

What's included in the basic package?

Subscription to the major providers' most basic package (*Austar Digital Essentials*, *Foxtel Digital Basic* and *Optus TV Entertainment Pack*) gives you access to the following channels:

- **Entertainment and information:** Arena, Australian Christian Channel, Discovery, Expo (except Foxtel Digital), f Fashion TV (Foxtel Digital only), Fox 8, Fox Classics, The Lifestyle Channel, National Geographic Channel, Ovation (Optus TV only), TV1, TVSN (Shopping Network), UK TV (except Austar Digital), W (except Optus TV).
- **Sport:** EuroSportNews (except Optus TV), Fox 1 Sports, Fox 2 Sports, Fox Footy, Sky Racing.
- **Music and entertainment:** Optus TV has MTV Australia in its basic package. Austar and Foxtel offer Air, CMC Country Music, Max and Channel [V].
- **News and weather:** BBC World, Bloomberg Television (except Optus TV); CNBC Australia, CNN, Fox News, Sky News, Sky News Active (except Optus TV), The Weather Channel.
- **Kids and family:** Cartoon Network, Disney

Channel (except Foxtel Digital), Nickelodeon (except Optus TV).

■ **Movies:** Turner Classic Movies (TCM, Optus TV only).

■ **Pay-per-view:** Subscription to the basic package usually also includes pay-per-view access (meaning you pay for each program you watch) to Main Event, Box Office (except Optus TV) and Adults Only Select.

Pretty much the same?

In November 2002, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission approved a content-sharing arrangement between market leader Foxtel and rival Optus, which enabled the pay TV operators to offer their subscribers the same channels. For example, the three Movie Network channels, which had previously only been available to Optus and Austar pay TV subscribers, are now also offered by Foxtel, and subscribers to Optus's analogue service can get access to some of the Foxtel channels.

If you have the choice of more than one pay TV provider in your area, check out their channel packages and prices carefully. While the channels on offer may be very similar, their packaging for extra channels may vary, which could save you money if the channel you want is available in a lower-priced option.

Can I get free-to-air channels via pay TV?

Many viewers use their pay TV connection to get a better picture on the free-to-air channels. But not all pay TV providers retransmit all free-to-air channels everywhere.

■ **Foxtel** retransmits (in digital format) to its satellite subscribers channel Nine (in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane), ABC and SBS (from early 2005). To its cable subscribers it retransmits (in digital format) channel Nine (in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane), ABC and SBS and (in analogue format) channels Seven, Ten and, in Perth and Adelaide only, Nine.

■ **Optus TV** retransmits all national (ABC, SBS, channels Seven, Nine and Ten) and local channels on its cable network.

■ **Austar** broadcasts ABC and SBS nationally, and local channels WIN, Seven and Nine in Darwin via cable, but not on its satellite service elsewhere in Australia because of bandwidth constraints.

What 'rewards' for 'service bundling'?

Foxtel Digital and Austar Digital are also sold by other telecommunications companies (see *Who provides pay TV?*, page 18), which 'bundle' their services with pay TV and offer special 'rewards' to entice their customers to get more than one service from the one company, all on one bill. The more services you select from the one company (land line, mobile, internet, pay TV), the bigger your savings usually are.

The rewards on offer late last year for bundling pay TV with other services included free or discounted installation, discounted mobile phone monthly access fees and pay TV subscriptions, a certain number of free calls or SMS — and, of course, the convenience of having only one service provider to deal with and getting only one bill for all the services.

But before you decide to swap telco providers

Other pay TV providers

If you live in the ACT or regional Victoria, you may also have access to the following smaller pay TV operators.

■ **Neighborhood Cable** provides broadband internet, telephone and cable television to its subscribers in regional Victoria (Ballarat, Geelong and Mildura). Its *Starter Pack* (\$10.95 per month) is smaller (and cheaper) than those of its competitors and includes a movie channel (TCM) as well as one news, one shopping and one kids' channel plus all available free-to-air channels.

The *Value Pack* (\$33.95 per month) has 16 channels altogether, including the movie network; also available are a *Sports TV* and *Smart TV Pack* (\$33.95 each per month) or a *Supreme Pack* (the lot, for \$54.95 per month). Fox Footy and special-interest upgrades are also sold separately.

Residential customers can get broadband internet, phone and the starter pack in a bundled discounted service for \$47.87 per month.

■ **TransACT** provides telephone, broadband internet and cable TV

services (TransTV Digital with over 30 channels) to subscribers in the ACT and Queanbeyan. Its basic *Classic* package includes four news, two kids', one movie (TCM), all five free-to-air and several special-interest channels as well as video-on-demand.

TransTV Digital is available only to TransACT phone customers. Packages that include phone, broadband internet and pay TV cost from \$59.95 to \$83.45 per month, depending on the speed of the broadband connection (or \$49.95 for a phone/TV only package). Other packages sell for \$17.95 (*Family*: 14 channels), \$12.95 (*Lifestyle*: eight channels), \$7.95 (*Discovery*: five channels) and *Director's Choice* (individual channels from \$1.95 per month).

TransACT can also resell the Foxtel Digital satellite service, but it isn't available over the TransACT cable network.

■ **Jadeworld** provides a multi-channel satellite TV service to Chinese viewers in Australia.

■ **Television Oceania** is only available to hotels and corporate subscribers.

because of the discounts offered for bundling, read the fine print carefully and make sure you understand all the conditions, exclusions and minimum terms. Most complaints the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) receives about bundled services relate to the discounts offered. So ensure you know which product(s) the discount(s) apply to and how much money you're likely to save.

If I have a dispute that I can't settle with the pay TV provider, who can I turn to for help?

At present, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman has no jurisdiction over pay TV, even though the service may be provided by one of its members. You'd take complaints about billing, service provision, fault repair, disconnection, credit control and the like to the state-based offices of fair trading; complaints about content to the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

This situation is confusing, especially if you have your pay TV bundled with other services and receive a single bill. You may have to contact different authorities with a complaint, depending on which service your problem relates to — and that could get tricky if it's, say, a rewards billing dispute.

It's currently being discussed whether pay TV should fall within the TIO's jurisdiction, or only if it's provided in a bundle of services. We'd like to see the establishment of a Communications Industry Ombudsman as a 'one-stop shop' for resolution of consumer complaints in communications. This would expand the jurisdiction of the TIO to bring in consumer complaints relating to pay TV services, network connections and perhaps customer equipment issues.

How else can I save money?

Even if you don't want to bundle your services, it's still worthwhile looking, or waiting, for specials from the pay TV operators directly. Late last year, for example, most operators were offering special deals; in fact some even had several promotions going at the same time, a different offer for each different sales avenue.

You're most likely to get a discount if you sign up for 24 months and pay by direct debit — you may even get charged a few dollars extra if you don't choose direct debit. Make sure you can honour this commitment for two years, though, as early termination of the contract usually incurs a hefty cancellation fee (between \$200 and \$300).

Subscribing online may also attract a discount, as it involves the least effort on the company's part. In general, the longer your contract and the more



comprehensive (and costly) the package(s) you choose, the higher the discount offered.

Free standard installation is a common incentive offered, sometimes accompanied by a certain account credit, or the first month's subscription to the basic package free for certain customers. Without such special offers, the costs for standard installation are stepped. As before, the longer your contract and the more comprehensive the package, the lower your installation costs.

For example, a standard installation on its own can cost more than \$300, or around \$250 with a six-month contract, right down to \$25–\$50 with a 12-month agreement, or sometimes even free with a 24-month contract.

What's involved in installation?

If you're connecting to cable TV, the company's technician will wire the cable to a wall plate in your home. A set-top box, which is connected to the wall plate, is part of the installation. Subscribers to digital pay TV also need a return path installed (from the back of the set-top box to the phone line) so you can use some of the interactive services.

Satellite subscribers get a satellite dish installed (usually on the roof of the home), and then wired to the wall plate. ■

Hung out to dry?

Washer-dryers have two-in-one convenience, but do you get twice the performance or double the problems?



IN A NUTSHELL

■ Most of the washer-dryers on test work well as a washing machine, but only two out of the five got the clothes properly dry in one dryer cycle.

■ Generally you can only dry about half a full load of washing, so if you want the machine to automatically wash then dry, you can only wash a small load.

■ The cycle time to do this can be very long: more than five and a half hours for the slowest machine.

■ It might surprise you that most of them use a lot of water when drying — see As a dryer, right for why.

If you live in a flat or have a holiday house, a washer-dryer seems like the ideal solution to space problems, combining both washing and drying functions into one unit that can easily sit under a kitchen bench.

But do you really get a machine that washes as well as a washing machine and then dries as well as a separate dryer? Based on our test results of all the washer-dryers we found on the market, we'd weigh up the pros and cons of buying one pretty carefully, as most don't really give you the same performance overall that a separate washer, and especially a separate dryer, would.

WHAT TO BUY

MIELE Honeycomb Care WT945S

\$3499

LG Intelluwasher WD-1480RD*

\$1999

* Discontinued, but may still be available in shops.

The MIELE is the best of the five washer-dryers tested, but it's expensive to buy and fairly small, only drying a 2.5 kg load. If you want a bigger (and cheaper) machine the LG is the best choice of the rest, though you'll have to put up with very long washing and drying times.

AS A WASHER

Generally these machines worked as well as conventional washers: the MIELE, LG and HAIER in particular all performed comparably to other front loaders, with the HAIER scoring especially well for dirt removal even with a full load and the MIELE offering great spin and energy efficiency.

The ARISTON, however, scored only 56% for dirt removal, which was disappointing for an otherwise comparatively good machine with excellent energy efficiency. It's quite unusual for a washing machine to score so poorly for its primary function.

AS A DRYER

When it comes to drying the real weaknesses of the washer-dryers become apparent. For a start they can't dry full wash loads — you either need to wash a half load (or whatever size the manufacturer recommends for drying) and let it go through to the dryer program, or wash a full load and then take half out before you dry.

Considering their smaller drying capacity, all are also slow compared to most conventional dryers, with the LG, for example, taking nearly three hours to dry a half load. But at least it actually dried the clothes — it and the MIELE are the only two that can

really be recommended as performing reasonably well as a dryer, the others all leaving clothes damp at the end of a single drying cycle. And we gave them a good chance: if they had a dryness sensor we used it, and if not we set the time to maximum.

These dryers are condenser dryers. As such, they use water from the mains to condense the steam from the clothes back to water when drying, then flush this with any lint down the drain. But while this has advantages — you don't need to duct hot, wet air away and there's no lint filter to clean — most use an awful lot of water to do it.

The worst offender, the **OMEGA**, uses a full 72 L per drying cycle — the equivalent of six flushes of a standard toilet and more than it uses on its normal washing cycle. It doesn't have to be like this: the efficient **MIELE** only uses 12 L for drying.

And the water used for drying isn't included on the dryer energy label on the machines, as only the washing function label is required to include water consumption. We've noted the water each machine uses for washing and drying in the table (page 24) and included this in our running cost calculations.

High water use could particularly be an issue if you intend installing one of these machines on a tank-water system.

RUNNING TIME

You wouldn't want to be in a hurry for clean clothes: none of these machines is quick to run, particularly if you want them to go all the way from wash to dry.

The **LG**, for example, takes five and a half hours

to wash and dry a half load (but at least that's 4 kg). Even the best-performing **MIELE** still took three and a quarter hours — a long time to wait for a machine that's washing and drying just 2.5 kg of clothes.

If you have the space for two machines, it's worth weighing up this time (and the small load sizes) against how long it would take you to wash and dry a load with a stand-alone washing machine and dryer. Based on previous **CHOICE** tests, we think it'd often be quicker. Plus with separate machines you can run both at the same time.

EASE OF USE

When you've got one machine performing two functions, the controls need to make it easy to work out what you're trying to do when. The **LG** is particularly clear and intuitive and, along with the **MIELE**, was assessed as easy to use. Unfortunately the others weren't so easy to figure out.

CLOTHES TOO CREASED?

A letter from a subscriber alerted us that some washer-dryer models seem to crease clothes excessively. We noted that the **LG** creased its load more noticeably than the other models.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There's no question that the space-saving aspect of these machines is attractive, and some work well as washing machines. Overall, though, if you have a choice we think you'd get better and faster performance with a separate washer and dryer.

TIGHT FIT

Be wary of maximum-capacity claims for washing machines. While all the models tested this time could take their maximum load, for some it was a very tight fit. So if you often wash large loads, check and compare the actual drum size of the machines you're considering.

And because these machines can't dry the full wash load in one operation, if you think you'll use the dryer a lot, look for a washer-dryer with a larger drying capacity.

Recycle the water?

If you're worried about all the water these washer-dryers (and ordinary washing machines) use, you might be able to recycle some of it as 'greywater' in the garden (you'll need to check with your local council and water authority first). Some rules to follow include:

- Use only the rinse water (or dryer water), not the main wash water.
- Don't put it onto your veggie garden.
- Choose detergents with low or no phosphorus and avoid ones with sodium perborate (oxygen bleach).
- Use the water immediately as bacteria can multiply in it rapidly.

For more information see **CHOICE**, November 2004, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on 'Greywater, reusing' in the index. 

For people with a disability

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre, NSW, assessed the washer-dryers to see which are suitable for people with a disability.

- If you're in a wheelchair, front loaders are easier to use than top loaders so all are generally suitable. The best are the **LG** and the **MIELE**, which have doors that open a full 180°, with controls and all areas of the drum easy to reach. The **LG** has a traditional latch while the **MIELE** has a pushbutton that can be activated with the palm of the hand or elbow if needed.
- If you have problems with your hands, wrists or arms, machines with pushbutton controls at the front are best. The **LG** is the easiest to operate, and the **ARISTON** has large dials that are easy to turn.
- If you suffer from back pain all are generally good as you can sit in front of them or have them mounted on a bench at chest height so that you can reach in.
- If you have a vision impairment none is ideal, with the best being the **LG** due to its large, well-contrasted controls and auditory feedback.
- For people with a cognitive impairment all these machines could be potentially confusing if the washer-dryer concept is unfamiliar. The **LG** is the clearest for selecting which buttons are for washing and drying.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES: WASHING	
	1 Overall washer / dryer score (%)	2 Overall washing score (%)	3 Overall drying score (%)	4 Washer / dryer ease of use score (%)	5 Overall water used, wash / dry (L)	6 Cycle time, wash / dry (h:min)	7 Noise (dB)	Delay start (hours)	Out-of-balance correction
MIELE Honeycomb Care WT945S	78	78	76	80	59 / 12	1:56 / 1:20	66	1-9	✓
LG Intellowasher WD-1480RD (A)	73	76	62	90	106 / 57	2:40 / 2:51	66	3-19	✓
ARISTON AL128D Margherita 2000 (B)	68	70	65	70	75 / 31	1:30 / 2:32	72	1-12	✓
HAIER XQG50AB1100CTX (C)	61	74	44	70	91 / 38	2:11 / 2:00	66		✓
OMEGA WD1052	59	73	40	70	56 / 72	1:56 / 2:20	70		✓

The cost of convenience

If you look at the recommended retail prices, most of these machines are expensive to buy. However, in our price checking we found that some of them could be bought for significantly less. So our advice is definitely to shop around and ask for discounts.

Unfortunately the exception here is MIELE. While manufacturers can't dictate the minimum a store sells a machine for — to do so would breach the

Trade Practices Act and could attract a penalty of up to \$10 million — MIELE does business differently. It's made its retailers into agents and restricted them to taking orders at fixed prices. This means, short of finding a MIELE sale or perhaps buying a package of MIELE goods, the recommended retail price listed in our tables is what you can expect to pay.

To see a full breakdown of scores for washing and drying functions, go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on 'Washer-dryers' in the index. If you don't have access to the internet call 1800 069 552 and we'll send them to you.

Profiles

We've profiled all the tested washer-dryers (in rank order) as for most people they're a new type of machine and, despite might suit your particular circumstances. Prices are recommended retail, as provided in December 2004.



MIELE HONEYCOMB CARE WT945S

Price: \$3499

GOOD POINTS

- Best overall score as both a washer and a dryer.
- The best drying performance — one of only two machines that got clothes properly dry in one cycle — and a reasonable drying time compared to conventional dryers.
- Very good spin efficiency, so clothes should dry quite fast even if you don't use the dryer.
- The most efficient use of water for the dryer function, using just 12 L per cycle.
- The fastest running time for a 'normal' wash and one dryer cycle — around 3½ hours.
- The lowest running costs — the dryer has a 4.5 star energy rating, and the machine is very energy-efficient during the wash cycle.
- Very easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Significantly the most expensive to buy.



LG INTELLOWASHER WD-1480RD

Price: \$1999

GOOD POINTS

- The highest-capacity machine on test.
- Comparatively good 4 kg dryer capacity, and one of only two machines that got clothes properly dry in one cycle.
- The easiest to use, with intuitive controls and 'time remaining' display.
- Very energy-efficient during the wash cycle.

BAD POINTS

- The longest cycle times for both washing and drying — one 'normal' wash plus one dry cycle takes around 5½ hours.
- Creases clothes more noticeably than the others.
- The highest running costs.
- Comparatively high energy use when on standby (plugged in but not operating).



ARISTON AL128D MARGHERITA 2000

Price: \$1999

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent energy efficiency on the wash cycle.
- The shortest cycle time for a 'normal' wash.
- Comparatively good 4 kg dryer capacity.
- Second-lowest water consumption overall.

BAD POINTS

- The worst score for dirt removal when washing at full capacity.
- Disappointing drying performance — it failed to completely dry clothes in one cycle, even though it takes around two and a half hours.
- The noisiest machine in this test.
- Program selection information is inconsistent between the instruction book, the energy label and the advice panel in the detergent dispenser, which makes a complicated job even harder.

				FEATURES: DRYING				SPECIFICATIONS				COSTS		
Load sensor	Extra rinse	Water-saver option	Cold-only connection possible*	Controls	Reverse tumble	Temp. settings	Overheat protect	Capacity (wash / dry, kg)	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)**	Warranty (years)†	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	8 Running costs (\$ / 10 years)	Price (\$)††
✓	✓	✓	✓ (E)	Sensor, timer	✓	4	✓	5 / 2.5	850 x 595 x 600	2	Germany	Miele	2353	3499
✓	✓		✓	Sensor, timer	✓	4		8 / 4	850 x 595 x 620	2	Korea	LG	3969	1999
	✓		✓	Timer		1		6 / 4	850 x 595 x 535	2	Italy	Arisit	3146	1999
		✓	ns	Timer		3		5 / 2	850 x 595 x 550	3	China	Haier	2786	999
	✓		✓	Timer		2		5 / 2.5	850 x 595 x 550	2	ns	Smeg	2922	1590

* Some models need a Y-shaped connector or a cap for the hot-water tap to connect to cold water only; it may be supplied or need to be bought separately.

** Dimensions are for the smallest box that would fit around the machine, allowing for inlets and drain hoses.

† Warranty conditions vary; check with the manufacturer.

†† Prices are recommended retail, as provided by the manufacturers in December 2004.

ns Not stated.

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in shops.

(B) Also available as the AL128DS, with a stainless steel door, for \$2099.

(C) Out of stock as we went to press, but should be available by April.

(D) Depends on program selected.

(E) Has no hot-water inlet.

1 Overall washer/dryer score

This is a combined total made up of the following:

■ Overall washing score: 40% (based on washing a full load on the 'normal' cycle in warm water).

■ Overall drying score: 40% (based on one dryer cycle with the manufacturer's recommended maximum dryer load).

■ Washer/dryer ease of use score: 20%

2 Overall washing score

Dirt removal makes up 40% of the overall washing score; gentleness and spin, water and energy efficiency are each 15%.

3 Overall drying score

Drying performance (which includes moisture removal and energy efficiency), drying time, and water use in one drying cycle are weighted equally to arrive at this score.

4 Washer/dryer ease of use score

All the machines were rated highly for their controls, ease of loading and unloading, and access to the drum. However, as washer-dryers some were more intuitive to use than others and their score reflects this.

5 Overall water used, wash/dry

This is the water used to run a 'normal' wash cycle with a full load plus a dryer cycle with the maximum capacity recommended by the manufacturer.

6 Cycle time wash/dry

The wash time is for the 'normal' cycle. The dry time is for the complete dryer cycle at the recommended maximum load capacity.

7 Noise

These are the maximum noise levels recorded during a wash spin cycle (the noisiest these machines get); they're around the level of a normal conversation. The noise is recorded at 1 m away from the machine and 1 m above the ground.

8 10-year running costs

These calculations are worst-case, based on running the machine once a day with one full-capacity wash and two dryer cycles (an operation that would take around eight hours and 20 minutes for the LG and four and a half hours even for the MIELE). Costs are estimated as 15 cents per kWh and \$1 per 1000 L water used, including the water used in the drying cycle.

pointing performance of some models in some areas, particular attributes



HAIER XQG50AB1100CTX

Price: \$999

GOOD POINTS

■ The best dirt removal score on the 'normal' cycle with a full wash load.

BAD POINTS

■ Poor dryer performance — it left clothes the dampest of all the machines after a full (two-hour) cycle.

■ The least water-efficient on the 'normal' wash cycle.

■ The least energy-efficient as a dryer.

■ The smallest capacity for a wash-and-dry cycle — just 2 kg.



OMEGA WD1052

Price: \$1590

GOOD POINTS

■ Good dirt removal on the 'normal' cycle when run at the dryer-capacity load of 2.5 kg (but not so good with a full load).

■ Very energy-efficient on the wash cycle.

■ It has a useful function whereby you have to select the half-load option before it can operate in washer-dryer mode, reducing the likelihood that that you'll try (unsuccessfully) to dry a full load.

BAD POINTS

■ Left clothes damp at the end of the dryer cycle, even though it takes over two and a quarter hours.

■ Very high water usage (72 L) during the dryer cycle — more than for washing (56 L).

What's up with our power supply?

DANGER
HIGH VOLTAGE
KEEP OUT



Consumers in some states are facing blackouts and higher power prices. What's gone wrong?

IN A NUTSHELL

■ Ten years ago consumers were promised better electricity supply and lower prices if the industry was reformed. But the changes have delivered mixed results: consumers in some states are better off than in others.

■ It's become complicated to keep our power bills down. The onus has been pushed onto us to shop around for a good deal (which may not be available to everyone), wade through complex contract information and then find ways to reduce our consumption.

■ The electricity market needs to be further reformed so vulnerable households are protected and good deals are available everywhere.

The last few years were meant to be good for consumers when it came to electricity. A series of big changes to the power industry, including the break-up of the big old monopoly power companies, electricity becoming a traded commodity, and consumers being offered electricity retail competition so they could shop around and switch to the best deal were all meant to result in lower prices and better supply.

But have these changes really delivered households reliable power for a reasonable price?

Consider the following: in 2003 in South Australia, consumers faced a 30% increase in their electricity bills (an average of \$218 a year) — a move that pushed many low-income households there into financial distress. Nearly 20% of people seeking assistance from welfare agencies did so primarily because of high electricity bills, and over 80% of all welfare clients had their financial problems compounded by these high power bills. A welfare report found people skipping meals, pawning possessions or showering every second day in order to manage and pay their higher power costs.

In the hot summer of 2000 in Victoria, consumers lost out in a big way on supply when severe restrictions were placed on the use of electricity, 18 years after the last major blackout had taken place. And in March 2004 the threat of disconnections

for non-payment of bills seemed so dire that the Victorian Council of Social Service warned that up to one in four Victorian households could have their electricity and gas services cut off when the state entered full deregulation, forcing the government to extend the laws for consumer protection to at least 2007.

In Queensland, a series of blackouts in early 2004 led to an official government inquiry that found parts of the state's electricity infrastructure had been run into the ground and not adequately maintained.

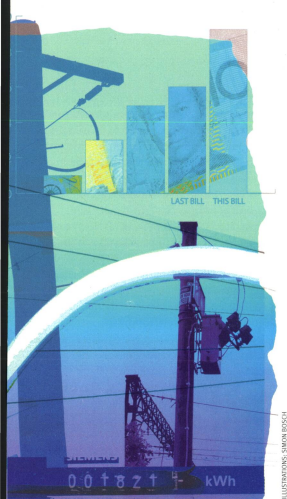
What's more, Australia-wide, most experts agree electricity prices are heading in just one direction. Up.

So how did it come to this? To understand what's going on — and to find out what you can do — you need to know a bit about what's gone on with power over the last 10 years.

A BRIEF HISTORY

In the early 1990s, competition fever gripped federal and state governments. Electricity was a prime target for reform, boosted by a belief that the then state-run electricity monopolies were 'fat', with too many workers, and were endowed with too much 'goldplating' — where the engineers running the plants put in place needlessly expensive contingency plans for every conceivable emergency.

Around the same time, state premiers began



discussing a national electricity network covering NSW, Victoria, Queensland, SA, Tasmania and the ACT. Plans were made for a 'national grid' that would create better access to supply by linking power generators from the eastern and southern states.

The two goals soon became intertwined. Governments, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, began breaking up the monopolies, separating the power industry into discrete companies that supplied generation, transmission, distribution or retail. The aim was to increase competition particularly in the generation and retail sectors. The newly minted power companies were also required to pay their administering government 'dividends'. Two states, Victoria and SA, took this reform process even further by privatising their industries entirely, selling off their new power companies.

Power was to be traded in a National Electricity Market (NEM). The model chosen for the generators to sell electricity units to the retailers was a compulsory wholesale 'pool', based on the UK model of the time. All generators were to sell into the pool and receive the same 'spot' price at any given time, with the lowest-price bid by a generator that can meet the demand (in five-minute intervals) setting the price for the rest.

The rules, or National Electricity Code, by which this operates currently cap the highest wholesale price for which electricity can be offered at \$10,000 per

megawatt hour (MWh, or 1000 kilowatt hours), though in 2003 the spot price was less than \$40/MWh for around 90% of the time. In theory, market pressures ensure that energy consumers get the best price possible. But keep in mind that huge wholesale price range — it becomes important later.

On December 13, 1998, the NEM started trading, with NSW, Victoria, SA and the ACT all involved. Queensland joined in 2000, as will Tasmania when Basslink (a powerline link joining Tasmania to the mainland) comes online in 2005.

DID IT WORK?

By most measures these reforms did achieve industry productivity improvements, largely due to massive cuts in staffing numbers. A 2002 Productivity Commission report found that real

Can you get a better deal?

One aspect of electricity reform that was meant to deliver lower prices to consumers was the ability to choose their electricity retailer. Currently household consumers in NSW, Victoria, SA and the ACT can do this.

Has it delivered the goods? In fact surprisingly little research has been carried out as to whether these offers — which typically involve simple discounts or rebates off the regulated tariffs — really provide good value.

When CHOICE (July 2003) asked retailers in Victoria, NSW and the ACT to quote on four household scenarios, we found that while some offers were better than current rates, others were the same as or even higher than the regulated tariffs, so didn't offer good value at all. Most competitive offers also lock you into fixed terms and have penalties for terminating the contract early. So you have to shop around carefully.

Recent figures seem to indicate getting a good deal depends on where you live. By February 2004 only around 12% of NSW household customers had taken up a market offer — largely, it appears, because the new offers don't seem to be much better value.

But in Victoria, where following privatisation customers have been more exposed to market forces and the marketing by retailers seems to have been more aggressive, 17% had taken up market contracts.

Research also suggests that market contracts are less likely to be made available to low-income and rural customers.

Even if your energy retailer offers you a new deal, it's often not easy to tell whether it's better than your current one — you need the ability to do some research and some calculations. This means figuring out which other power retailers operate in your area, calling them to find out their best offer, then comparing all the offers (and complicated contracts). Things to consider include the duration of the contract, the rebates and penalties that can apply, and whether the terms and conditions can be changed by the retailer during the term of the contract.

In Victoria and SA the governments are trying to make the comparison easier (see *Compare your costs*, page 30). But the bottom line is that the benefits vs costs aren't easy to work out, these offers often don't add up too much, and they aren't available to all households.

Low-income households penalised

There's a big difference between those who won't pay their power bills and those who can't pay, but at the moment it's those who can't pay who are being penalised. A study in SA found that while utility costs had risen by about twice the CPI since 2001, the Commonwealth benefits paid to people are linked to the CPI, so people on low incomes are paying relatively more for power. Unsurprisingly, more are then being cut off for not paying their bill.

But alternatives to disconnection do work. **COUNTRY ENERGY**, which operates in regional NSW, has put in place the 'Country Support Program', which reduced disconnections in its first year of operation from 9000 to 3000 without a negative impact on its own business.

household electricity prices fell in the decade 1990 to 2000 in some capital cities, with falls ranging from 1% in Melbourne to 5% in Sydney, 6% in Perth and 7% in Brisbane. The exceptions were Hobart, where prices rose 19%, Canberra up 8%, and Adelaide up 7%.

But there's no doubt that businesses, rather than households, were big winners, particularly as in the early years of deregulation they were able to strike good long-term contracts with generators for supply (when prices were cheap), but households weren't allowed to. The same Productivity Commission report found that business electricity costs fell 30–60% in NSW on average.

Households lost out in other ways too: in the past, governments structured the industry so that business

prices tended to subsidise household prices, but now they don't. And while there's an argument that lower business electricity costs flow on to consumers by virtue of lowering the costs of their products, this is more an assumption, rather than being clearly based on detailed economic analysis.

In some regional areas, tariffs and connection charges for consumers have also increased.

In fact, the biggest winners of all have been governments. Arguably top of the pops is the state that privatised when the going was good — Victoria. It earned \$23 billion from the sale of electricity assets (though it now seems to be paying some of this back through extensive subsidy regimes as rising household prices hurt electorally).

Governments in NSW and Queensland have also done very well, reaping the benefits of deregulation (primarily in terms of efficiency) without the pain of privatisation that occurred in SA, where the gain from selling off its power industry has turned out to be a one-off, not ongoing, benefit. The numbers tell the tale. In 2000/2001 NSW Treasury extracted \$3500 million in 'returned equity' from its power industry plus large annual dividends, while Queensland reaps around \$800 million a year (plus 'special dividends').

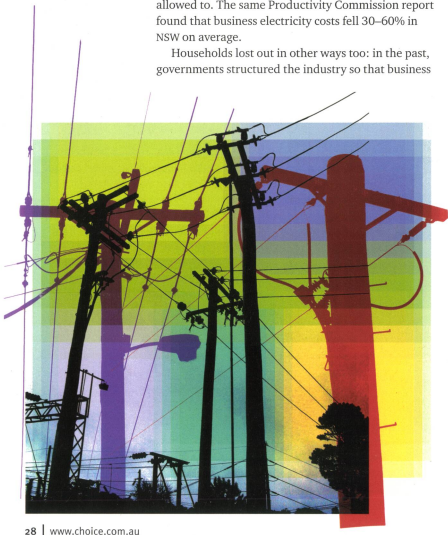
More recently the picture has become even less rosy for consumers. Between 1998 and 2003 (a time that coincides with the move to the NEM) the average retail electricity price in Australia rose by around 12.4% as the benefits from labour productivity improvements topped out and the power plant energy surplus that had existed when the market was established began to fall.

What's more, a spate of mergers among generator companies now has business groups publicly worried that power prices are likely to soar over the next decade as competition decreases. This is doubly bad news for consumers since, along with higher household bills, the price of goods will likely rise too.

There just aren't enough players in the Australian generation business to ensure a healthy level of competition. "The generators all have a reasonable idea of what each can do and they have an idea of each other's price points," points out electricity educator Andrew Nance. "It's not really operating as an independent market and it isn't that big."

NOT ALL STATES ARE EQUAL

Finally — particularly given the fact the national grid was never built — not all states are equal in terms of their ability to access supply. "Essentially there's a north/south divide in terms of supply," says Dr Robert Booth, director of energy consultants The Bardak Group.



“Queensland and NSW are in a happy situation — they have low tariffs, good power plants and generators and good transmission systems. Victoria and SA are running into problems. And the real problem here is that the national grid was never built. So there’s a surplus in the north, but we can’t get it into Victoria and SA.”

Indeed consumers in SA are the biggest losers from the whole process, paying substantially more for their power while still being left with a potentially unreliable and inadequate supply.

NSW, with plenty of power capacity, has been a winner in the electricity market, consumers there enjoying the lowest power prices in the country. And while the industry was broken up and corporatised, ownership was retained in government hands.

“When spot prices are high the NSW government bears the risks for the retailers,” points out Jim Wellmore, Senior Policy Officer, NSW Public Interest Advocacy Centre. “When prices are low it does so for the generators. In SA and Victoria, why should the government underwrite the risks of private companies?”

In Queensland, though, it’s not all rosy — the consequences of political decisions aimed at keeping electricity prices down, primarily by not investing in infrastructure, have boomeranged back in the form of blackouts, as noted earlier. And Queensland’s population is also increasing rapidly, with 1100 new arrivals a week, so demand is only going to grow.

For more on the situation in each state, go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on ‘Electricity market’ in the index.



SO HOW DID IT ALL GO WRONG?

Unlike in the past, consumers are now more exposed to a peak and trough market cycle when it comes to their electricity bills. So the increasing power bills you’re seeing in a big part come down to good old supply and demand. And with power consumption increasing, so are prices.

There are also big questions being asked as to whether the electricity market is really operating to provide consumers with good prices and reliable supply. In short, while the industry reforms (which cost hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to carry out) may have increased efficiency, they also coincided with a period of electricity oversupply — which gave the illusion of benefit, as oversupply also means falling prices.

Since then, though, demand for electricity has increased dramatically, so goodbye surplus capacity, hello increasing prices. But the problem is, the market doesn’t seem to have done promptly what it should be doing next — building more base-

load generating plants (which run more or less continually and supply electricity at the lowest cost) or better managing supply.

In Victoria, for example, despite increasing demand, there have been no new base-load power plants built since 1992. And because in both Victoria and SA power companies aren’t government-owned, there’s no obligation for the government to build future supply, or for any government body in either state to compel the necessary private construction.

SUPPLY, DEMAND AND AIR CONDITIONERS

Electricity isn’t like water — it’s impossible to store it in large amounts. So supply is maintained by generators expanding or contracting their power plant output as demand goes up and down.

On hot summer afternoons, demand increases dramatically as people turn up their air conditioners. On a few very hot days special ‘peaking plants’ crank into action. Typically these peaking plants command the highest electricity prices of all — they have to be maintained year round even though they only run a few times a year.

So one answer as to why there are higher prices is our hunger for air conditioners to cope with the hot summers we’ve been having (see *Hot air and the big chill*, below), which has pushed up prices overall. This has been very good for generator companies — some of them make almost their entire profit on these few ‘spiky’ days, even though there’s a maximum cap on prices. And because all generators are paid from the pool market at the same price, they all earn big money when demand peaks.

Hot air and the big chill

One of the biggest problems with air conditioners is they’re being used as a first resort for house-cooling, rather than a last: one survey found nearly a third of households in SA with an air conditioner weren’t insulated.

Does this mean you shouldn’t buy one? Not necessarily. But it should be your last purchase rather than your first for cooling down. By checking through the list below you can keep your power prices down over the long term.

Before you buy any air conditioning, ask yourself:

- If I’m buying a house, does it: have a good orientation (north is best); include design elements good for energy efficiency (large eaves, cross-ventilation, insulation in walls and ceilings) or is it a large, glassy box that can only be cooled by air conditioning?

- Have I done everything else to my house to cool it down — put in roof insulation, shades over the windows (especially those facing west), planted shade trees, improved cross-ventilation and considered extra glazing for my windows?

- If I’m buying an air conditioner, is this the most energy-efficient one I can get (preferably with an energy rating of at least four stars) or am I paying less for a cheap unit now but facing bigger power bills over the next 10 years?

STAYING AHEAD OF THE GAME

To reduce the impact of price hikes, the most effective action you can take is to reduce your own consumption:

- When replacing major appliances, buy ones that are energy-efficient.

- Install a more energy-efficient hot-water system, the best being solar, then gas or off-peak electricity.

- Fit energy and water-efficient showerheads and taps, and energy-efficient light bulbs.

- Refit your house for the seasons: in winter, reduce draughts and seal in warmth; for summer, shade your windows from heat before you buy an air conditioner.

For an easy energy audit of what’s using up power in your home — with some great tips as to what you can do about it — use the Country Energy Calculator at www.countryenergy.com.au/calculator.

COMPARE YOUR COSTS

Some states have now put programs in place that compare the different retail electricity schemes.

■ For a price comparison, South Australian consumers, armed with one to four previous power bills, can call 1800 226 100 between 8 am and 6 pm, Monday to Friday, or go to www.escosa.sa.gov.au.

■ Victorian consumers can check the energy comparator at www.reggen.vic.gov.au/electricity878.html or call 1300 134 575.

■ For fun, go to the NEMMCO website — www.nemmco.com.au — and you can track the current wholesale price of electricity.

But the market isn't working to restrain this demand or produce the necessary extra supply to really cope with it. And there's doubt whether a suggested remedy — price signals (aka 'slugging customers more when demand is high') — will work either.

In theory as soon as something becomes too pricey consumers stop buying it, demand drops and then so do the prices. But with more hot summers, we're also buying more air conditioners to keep us cool on the worst of these sizzle days. And even if the price of electricity was set higher during peak times we'd still be likely to just keep on buying power to cool down — and probably would even if we were given 'smart meters' that told us exactly what power was costing when.

What's more, because everyone in a state is connected to the same grid, whether you have an air conditioner or not, currently everyone pays the same (higher) rate for using their appliances.

IF DEMAND'S HIGH, WHY NOT BUILD MORE POWER STATIONS?

The problem is, the very factors that make generator companies want to ensure they get as much of the peak price action as possible also tend to discourage the building of new generating plants. After all, why improve supply when you're rewarded with a windfall when there's a shortage of it?

"If peak prices are incredibly high and you can gain one more day, everyone does very well for the year," points out Professor John Quiggin of the University of Queensland, who is far from alone in being suspicious that some generators try to 'game' or manipulate prices. There are also suggestions that some generators lower prices to deter other generators from building new plants.

Normally if you flout the law you can be

expected to pay, but at the moment the penalties for generators caught out manipulating the system are so disproportionate to the profits they can make that they might as well just build the occasional fine into their bottom line.

For instance, two years ago a generator was fined \$5000 for breaching the rules, when it's likely it would have made that amount many times over by doing so. By comparison, a breach by a company of the Trade Practices Act can attract a penalty of up to \$10 million.

What's more, the power industry can't respond fast (it takes a minimum of three to five years and around a billion dollars to build a new generator). And when market prices are so volatile — remember that spot price range from \$40/MWh to \$10,000/MWh — it's difficult for a generator to get a loan, as it's hard-pressed to guarantee its future income and therefore its ability to repay.

Again, what does all this mean for you? Well, if risk is a big factor, businesses generally want more money in the form of price rises, tax breaks or subsidies to compensate for it. So when it comes to building future supply the pressure is on for further price hikes that will hit consumers heavily.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

As consumers we essentially just want a reliable energy supply for a reasonable price. Part of the problem from the start has been that we were sold a false promise of what the reforms could bring — creating competition doesn't always lead to ever-decreasing electricity prices. The reality is that in a competitive market, electricity is traded just like oil, coffee beans or any other commodity. And in commodity markets prices rise and fall depending on supply — which, as in the case of electricity, can be affected by the weather or by production failures.

In fact, to ensure they're getting the best possible deal consumers now have to put in a lot of effort: work their way through quite complex power company offers for the best deal (see *Can you get a better deal?*, page 27) and take a hard look at what they can do in their own homes to minimise their own demand.

But now the combination of factors detailed in this article is pushing prices up. Add to this an aging infrastructure, thanks to 10 years of maintenance being stripped back to the bare bone in the name of productivity — particularly for transmission and power lines — and the repair and replacement of this infrastructure are also edging costs up. It shouldn't be just up to consumers to pay for this — the market must also continue to be reformed.

Many commentators now advocate that what

Better consumer representation needed

Electricity users don't have an influential peak organisation to represent them. The suppliers are well organised and lobby governments hard, but consumer interests are rarely heard or listened to.

In December 2003 the Council of Australian Governments adopted as the first step for further energy reform the move to a single energy regulator, to replace the 17 bodies that currently exist. But while this may be good for efficiency, some consumer advocates are concerned that it may lead to less protection for consumers.

For instance, there's no guarantee the advocacy panel from the National Electricity Code Administrator will be retained. CHOICE is meeting with governments, regulators and other energy users' associations to strongly promote consumer interests in electricity issues.

would make the biggest difference to the NEM is reforming or ditching the 'pool' market trading price system. Prices in Australia are much more volatile than overseas and we have comparatively fewer competitors than most privatised or deregulated markets.

"Australia is one of the last remaining areas of the world to persist with this form of trading," says Robert Booth, who estimates there are \$1 billion worth of extra costs in the market compared to the lowest possible pool prices. Like others, he favours generators being able to strike longer-term contracts as their main trading strategy.

And the national grid should be completed. The national market still operates as five regional markets, with substantial price differences between them. And the lowest-cost power can't make its way to other states.

To date only one major interconnection has been built since the NEM began (between NSW and Queensland), which ironically has proved very profitable. Studies have shown that project arguably paid for itself in less than six months of operation.

So for consumers to be guaranteed good power supply at reasonable prices, the reform process needs to continue; the market has to be made to work nationally, rather than regionally; and good incentives need to be put in place that reduce demand (particularly during summer peaks) as well as greenhouse gas emissions.

Electricity is an essential service. When it comes to deregulation and privatisation, whether a government owns the business or not, if something goes wrong it will pay at the ballot box. Voters have punished governments before for not getting it right and they should do so again if these problems of poor power supply and price shocks aren't rectified.

Demand-management programs needed

Demand management is about reducing and regulating demand to avoid or delay having to build more expensive power plants. Strategies focus on improving efficiency, more strategic use of off-peak power and straightforward consumption reduction. But few solid programs exist, though the Council of Australian Governments has now listed this as a priority.

■ One proposal involves the installation of 'interval' or smart meters, which record exactly when power is used and the variable price being paid, allowing consumers to regulate their demand. Currently available to businesses in Victoria, beginning in 2006 they'll also be available to residential customers.

The Essential Services Commission there has high hopes this will allow Victorians "to manage their own energy consumption patterns more effectively and to choose retail price/service offerings that will lower their power bills".

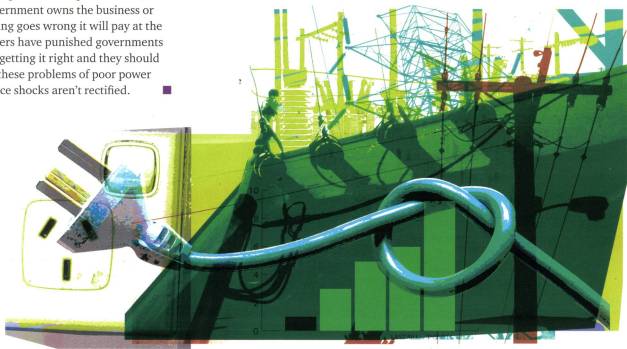
However, there's considerable doubt as to whether installing smart meters will really deter household (or business) consumers from using their air conditioners on hot days.

■ One of the few demand-management programs designed for and embraced by households is REFIT, a joint initiative between Hunter Water, Energy Australia and Newcastle City and Lower Hunter Councils in NSW.

REFIT sells and installs a basic range of products that help energy and water conservation in houses. Products worth \$120 are provided for just \$39, and it's been estimated a family of four saves \$150 a year in water and electricity costs. Operating since June 2004, within its first four months REFIT had installed kits in 1700 households. For information call 1800 815 727 (Lower Hunter and Central Coast residents) or go to www.hunterwater.com.au/watersavingscheme.asp.

■ Not every demand-management idea has proved as popular: a proposal from SA calls for air conditioners to be on their own circuit relays — like the switch for an off-peak hot water system — so when the grid is overloaded a signal is sent to 'cycle' the air conditioners, turning them off for 15 minutes in the hour.

"It's cost-effective, it's not too uncomfortable and it's cheaper to build than more infrastructure," says electricity educator Andrew Nance. "But when it's been suggested it's met a hostile response — 'I only bought it for the hot days' — and is seen as an invasion of personal choice."



Safe as houses?

Flyscreens are great for six-legged pests, but not so good against the two-legged variety — especially those brandishing a knife or screwdriver.



IN A NUTSHELL

■ Buy a door that displays the Standards Australia logo. While other doors may meet the standard, this is the easiest way to be sure.

■ Have the door installed in a way that meets the Australian standard for installation.

Security screen doors are designed to let you safely open up the house to air and light while you're at home — upstairs or out in the garden, say. They should prevent someone from sneaking quickly and quietly into your house when your main door's open and nicking your stuff, and deter or delay potential attackers long enough for you to call for help.

While they provide some level of protection, given enough time and the right equipment, they're still penetrable — some more so than others. Then there's the installation — attaching it to a weak door frame or allowing enough space to get good jamming leverage reduces its effectiveness as a security door.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Unfortunately in most states a product advertised as a "security screen door" may only secure you against flies: the term is meaningless unless the door can be shown to meet the Australian standard. However, in WA, any door advertised or sold as a security door must meet the Australian standard — something CHOICE would like to see applied nationally, and which the Australian Security Industry Association Limited (ASIAL) and the National Security Screens Association (NSSA) are lobbying for.

A proper security door must have a combination of several elements that make it secure. For example,

a strong grille is useless if the lock's easily broken. And a solid lock doesn't help if the hinges can be jimmied from the frame in moments.

While you can check some aspects of quality yourself (see *What to look for*, page 34), others are concealed in the structure and impossible for a typical consumer to assess.

THE STANDARD

Your best bet is to buy a door that meets the Australian standard for hinged and sliding security screen doors — AS 5039. This standard came into force in 2003, superseding the previous one, AS 2803 (which many companies still refer to, and which still provides acceptable protection). The standard includes design and performance requirements for the various parts of the door, such as hinges, grille, corner joints, locks, screws and rivets. A company can't claim that some parts of a door (hinges, grille, etc) meet the standard — it's all or nothing.

It's possible that a security screen door does meet the standard but doesn't carry the Standards Australia label or make any claims. Companies have to pay to use the logo, and smaller companies in particular may choose not to. Then there are companies that claim their door meets or passes the standard, though again with no label.

A company claiming compliance with the



standard should be prepared to provide proof if it doesn't carry the label — so ask to see the test report, or get a written guarantee when a company makes such a claim.

There's also a standard for installation (AS 5040, which replaced AS 2804), and you should ask the installation company for a written guarantee that its work complies with this standard.

The standard for testing (AS 5041) includes the door's ability to: withstand kicking in, pulling out and cutting the infill; prevent insects, arms and bodies passing through (depending on the door's purpose); and withstand jemmings the door from the jamb.

THE BUYING ESSENTIALS

■ **Do some homework** to work out what your needs and wants are, taking into account the level of security you need, the style of

door that suits your home best, features you want (the type of lock, the type of grille or mesh, whether you need to keep insects out, etc.). Use the internet, look at home and garden-type magazines, or the ads in the Yellow Pages are a good place to start.

■ **Check out credentials** of the company and the individuals you're dealing with. Do they belong to an industry organisation and are they licensed to carry out the work?

■ **Shop around** for products, prices and service, and get at least three quotes.

■ **Ask lots of questions** — the responses (or lack of) may tell you something about the company.

■ **Don't let yourself be pressured into signing on the spot** if you haven't had time to do your homework.

■ **And once more, for emphasis, buy one that meets the Australian standard.**

YOUR OPTIONS

The frame can be steel or aluminium, and the infill can be made from grille (bars or a decorative motif), an aluminium grille or stainless steel mesh. Fixing the grille to the frame can involve rivets, screws, a wedge (PVC or similar), welding or crimping. As long as the door meets the standard, choice comes down to looks and your budget. While price is one indicator of quality — and \$400 is a recommended

minimum — a high price doesn't guarantee quality. Security doors will almost always be custom-made, because tolerances for installing them so they meet the standard come down to mere millimetres.

We've listed some ballpark figures provided by NSSA (see below) as a guide, but it's definitely worth shopping around: if you can get a Standards-approved door for less, you could be getting a good deal. The prices apply to a standard-size hinged door and include typical installation costs.

■ Aluminium

You can buy an aluminium screen door for around \$200, but it's likely to be little more than a flyscreen. For a little more, you can get a heavy-duty (but not security) screen door which may at least look secure so thieves choose an easier target. For a custom-made door that meets the standard you're looking at \$400–\$500.

■ Steel

According to ASIAL, a steel door (if properly constructed and installed) is regarded as the most effective security screen door. A custom-made one will cost \$500–\$700 or more, depending on styling.

■ Stainless steel mesh (with aluminium or steel frame)

Made from woven stainless steel mesh (which is coloured black), these doors promise security without spoiling your view with bars and grilles: it's much like looking through a flyscreen. Some products have been tested to and meet the Australian standard, even though they may not look as formidable as steel bars or aluminium grilles — and that's the attraction for many people. They cost from around \$600–\$700.

Useful organisations

If the company selling and/or installing the door is a member of one of the following security industry associations, you know it has to meet certain quality requirements and you can lodge a complaint with the association if you're not happy.

■ Australian Security Industry Association Limited (ASIAL)

ASIAL represents approximately 85% of the security industry in Australia (not only security screen door companies). Its web address is www.asial.com.au.

■ National Security Screen Association (NSSA)

This is an industry body that aims to "promote the maintenance of quality fabrication and installation standards, as well as ethical trading practices, so as to establish and maintain ongoing consumer confidence in our industry". It's made up of state organisations based in Victoria, NSW, Queensland and SA. There's a searchable database of members on its website: www.nssa.org.au.



What to look for

■ In case you've only started reading here: buy a security door that meets the Australian standard. The latest version is AS 5039, although because it's relatively new, you're more likely to see reference to the previous standard, AS 2803, which is not as tough as the new standard, but still OK (see *The Standard*, page 32, for what's covered). If the door doesn't carry the Standards Australia label, yet the company claims it meets the standard, ask for a written guarantee stating the whole door complies with the standard, not just parts of it.

■ Ask for a written guarantee that the door is being installed according to Australian Standard AS 5040 (or at least the previous AS 2804).

■ In NSW and WA any company selling and/or installing security products must be licensed by the state police and a member of an accredited industry body. Ask to see the licence and also which organisation they're a member of, in case you have a complaint.

■ Try to find out the reputation of the companies you're dealing with: how long they've been in business and whether there have been any complaints against them. For example, you can call your state's crime prevention or fair trading departments.

■ Ask whether the company has product liability insurance, so you know you're covered in case you incur any damage or someone is injured due to a door being too weak or poorly installed.

■ Get several quotes for the type of door you want, and take your time comparing them.

ALL DOOR TYPES

■ **Locks** should be five-pin cylinder or equivalent — according to the standard, wafer locks are more vulnerable. A three-point lock may prevent the bottom or top of the door being wrenched back by an intruder, and should also spread the force of an attack.

■ The standard recommends not using aluminium rivets in accessible positions — some companies use stainless steel rivets.

■ The door should have at least three hinges with fixed hinge pins that can't be removed. A fixed steel pin ('dog bolt') that's welded into the hinge leaf, rather than just pressed into it, gives additional protection. The bigger the pin, the better.

Ideally the hinges should be recessed or the door should have a hinge filling between the door and the frame that doesn't allow access for a jemmy, say. A single hinge that runs along the full length of the frame does the same job.

■ The **frame** should have a deep receiver channel for the grille. Make sure the connection between the main part of the frame and the receiver channel is sturdy (see the illustration, far right).

■ The cords of the **grille** should be at least 7 mm thick.

However, even the strongest grille isn't worth much if it isn't fixed to the door frame properly. On many doors the grille is riveted to the frame. Look for rivets that are clinched at the back of the frame, and that aren't too far apart: at least one every 25 cm — ideally, every second connection point should be riveted. However, rivets may be badly aligned and therefore won't fully connect with the grille. A grille that's welded to the frame may be more reliable; again, no more than 25 cm between welding spots and ideally at every connection point.

■ The frame should be reinforced at the **corners**. Doors may have internal corner stakes, which you won't be able to see, but fully welded corner joints are likely to be stronger.

ALUMINIUM DOORS

■ While aluminium is less prone to **corrosion** than steel, the Australian standard still requires protection against corrosion by anodising or powder-coating.

■ Make sure it's made from heat-strengthened (**tempered**) aluminium.

STEEL DOORS

■ If it meets the standard it'll be protected against **corrosion**. To prevent rust in other steel doors, especially if you live near the sea, consider getting one that's been hot-dip galvanised and powder-coated. (Removing salt build-up with regular washing in warm soapy water can also help.)

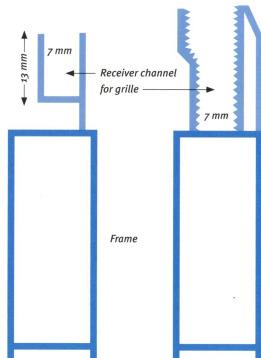
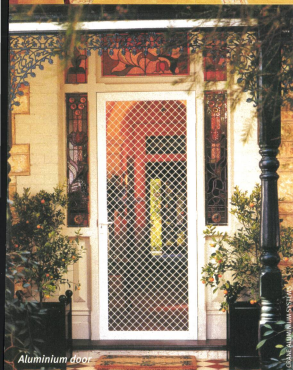
STAINLESS STEEL MESH

■ **Attachment:** We've seen one brand that uses stainless steel screws to clamp the mesh within the frame and others that use a PVC clamp. Both claim advantages over the other: the screw-clamp people claim screws hold the mesh in place better, while the plastic-clamp people claim there's reduced risk of galvanic corrosion from aluminium (frame) coming into contact with stainless steel (mesh).

We've seen no independent information that one's better than the other — as long as it meets the standard, you're likely to be safe with either. However, these doors are relatively new on the market: some longevity issues may become apparent in years to come.

■ There's also some argument over the best type of **mesh** to use: some manufacturers use marine-grade 316 mesh (the claimed advantage is that it's corrosion-resistant in salty environments), while another uses 304 grade mesh (its claimed advantage is that it's stronger than 316). Again, as long as it meets the standard, you should be OK with either — but watch this space in case any issues emerge over time.

■ The **frames** of these doors are likely to be aluminium, so the points under *Aluminium doors* apply (see above).



The connection between the main part of the frame and the receiver channel for the grille on the frame profile on the left may be a weak point. The one on the right shows a design that's likely to be sturdier.

Installation

Some requirements of the standard for installation of security screen doors (AS 5040) are:

- The installer has to assess whether the door frame is strong enough to support the security door — for example, that the jamb is in good condition and firmly fixed to the building. If necessary, the jamb may have to be reinforced, such as with metal jamb covers.

As door jambs often aren't square, a metal frame may be needed anyway to even out irregularities. Be aware that all this may reduce the width of the doorway and cause problems when moving furniture or appliances in and out, or for wheelchair access. It could also increase the cost of installation.

- The gaps between the security door and frame at the locking points mustn't be more than 4 mm; between the frame and hinge points 4 mm (or 6 mm for steel doors); at all other points, gaps mustn't be more than 5 mm, although at the bottom it may be more than this to compensate for an uneven floor.

- Think about the lock and how easy it will be to get out of your home in case of fire or other emergency.

Reader car reviews

Four popular small to medium-size models under our readers' microscope.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ *There's only so much research you can do yourself before buying a new car. But how well does it perform in everyday driving situations? Do the features work? How is it for space and noise? Check out here what the owners of four small to medium-size models have to say.*

Researching a new car purchase has become quite easy — the internet offers a wide range of readily accessible information, from a model's specifications, features and price to road test reports and crash test results.

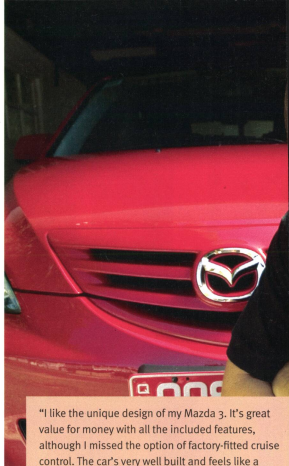
However, information on what a car is really like to drive and use day-to-day is harder to come by. That's why we asked a small panel of CHOICE readers to tell us why they chose a particular model, whether they've had problems with it, its strengths and weaknesses, and whether they consider it good value for money.

Thanks very much to everyone who participated. We received a sufficient number of survey responses to enable us to report on the HONDA Accord Euro, HYUNDAI Elantra, MAZDA 3 and TOYOTA Corolla.

We'll bring you reader reviews of 4WDs in an upcoming issue of CHOICE.

WANT MORE INFO?

For a limited time you have free access to our new and used car databases. Go to www.choiceextra.com.au and look under "Cars" in the index.



"I like the unique design of my Mazda 3. It's great value for money with all the included features, although I missed the option of factory-fitted cruise control. The car's very well built and feels like a much more expensive European model, except for some excessive noise on certain road surfaces."
Kevin Nice, Camp Hill, Queensland

TOYOTA Corolla

Price range: \$19,750–\$29,990

Versions: Ascent, Ascent Sport, Conquest, Levin, Ultima

Body styles: Hatch (except Ultima), sedan (except Levin), wagon (except Ascent Sport and Ultima)

Engine options: 1.8 L

ANCAP* safety rating: ★★★★★

RELIABLE AND FUEL-EFFICIENT

Most of our COROLLA reviewers were 35–50. They were after a comfortable, reliable, well-built and secure car, and generally didn't look much further than the COROLLA.

And the model seems to be well built — only one minor problem was reported. The features list left little to be desired for our readers, who bought hardly any options. But some owners of the base-version Ascent were unhappy with the level of safety features — they thought a passenger airbag should have been standard equipment (it's only available in a package with other safety options).

* The Australian New Car Assessment Program crash-tests cars to find out the level of protection they provide to their occupants. The highest rating is five stars.



MAZDA 3

Price range: \$20,790–\$31,220

Versions: Neo, Maxx, Maxx Sport, SP23

Body styles: Hatch, sedan

Engine options: 2.0 L (except SP23), 2.3 L (SP23 only)

ANCAP* safety rating: ★★★★★

WELL-BUILT BUT NOISY

Our MAZDA 3 reviewers were an even mix of genders and ages, wanting a safe, reliable and well-built car.

They also considered the HOLDEN Astra, HONDA Accord, NISSAN Pulsar and TOYOTA Corolla, but decided on the MAZDA 3 mainly because of its looks, purchase price and features.

They praised the car's fuel economy, comfort, handling and build quality—despite four (out of 17) cars being affected by a recall of the dealer-fitted cruise control (a factory-fitted version was on a number of readers' wish lists), and three having to have minor problems fixed under warranty.

One owner experienced significant problems and as a result had the engine of his car replaced under warranty. He's obviously disappointed with his purchase.

Noise (at least on some road surfaces) was a common complaint from our reviewers, as was restricted visibility out of the car.

The purchase price and running costs were generally considered to be medium, and the overall value for money good to very good.

Dealer-fitted cruise control was a popular extra for all versions, while some Neo owners opted for the safety pack (including ABS, side and curtain airbags) and power pack (power windows and mirrors). All these features are standard on the other versions.

The MAZDA 3 scored four stars in the ANCAP crash tests, and while only about half of the reviewers replied to our safety question, the ones who did feel they'd be well protected in a crash.

"My Corolla Conquest was more stylish and powerful than other models I looked at. It's comfortable, well built, performs great and feels safer than my last car. The beige velour of the seats looks good but marks easily."

Brendon Hedgcock, St Kilda East, Victoria

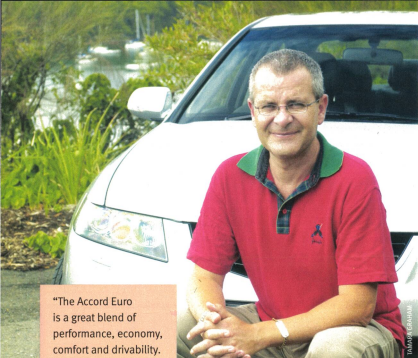
All costs (purchase price, fuel consumption, insurance and servicing) were generally considered medium to low, and the overall value for money of the model as good to very good. In fact, our reviewers saw the low fuel consumption as one of the major strengths of the car, together with its performance.

Most use the car for trips around town, and think that's what it's best suited for.

There were only minor grievances, such as the difficult-to-clean seat fabric. Two (out of nine) readers thought the audio system, exterior and interior styling of the COROLLA were only OK.

Most owners feel well-protected in the COROLLA, reflecting its four-star ANCAP safety rating.





"The Accord Euro is a great blend of performance, economy, comfort and drivability. It's a well-built car (although mine was affected by a recall), but visibility out the back window could be better."

Jon Gellibrand,
Greenwich, NSW

HONDA Accord Euro

Price range: \$33,500–\$42,500

Versions: 'Standard', Luxury

Body styles: Sedan

Engine options: 2.4 L

ANCAP* safety rating: ★★ ★

NOT CHEAP, BUT GOOD VALUE

All but one of our ACCORD EURO reviewers were male, mainly looking for a reliable, well-built car.

Almost all of them also considered the MAZDA 6, but their impression that the HONDA has better build quality and its features list gave the nod to the ACCORD EURO. However, one reviewer (out of seven) experienced a number of problems with the car, and felt it hadn't met his expectations.

Five cars were affected by a recall regarding the boot release, and there were two complaints about visibility out of the rear of the car.

On the other hand, the reviewers were generally happy with the model's fuel economy, comfort and performance.

Our readers had mixed emotions about the car's purchase price and running costs, with views ranging from high to very low. However, overall all agreed that the ACCORD EURO offers good to very good value for money.

Floor mats and a towbar were the main extras. Two readers would have liked the option of a trip computer.

Most of our reviewers feel they'd be well protected in a crash, reflecting the ACCORD EURO's four ANCAP stars.

HYUNDAI Elantra

Price range: \$18,990–\$25,980

Versions: GL, Elite

Body styles: Liftback, sedan

Engine options: 2.0 L

ANCAP* safety rating: ★★ ★

"The Elantra is a comfortable, responsive and roomy car, and I get good kilometres to the litre. Its price and standard features make it good value for money. However, the radio isn't great, and there are some annoying blind spots when looking out of the car."

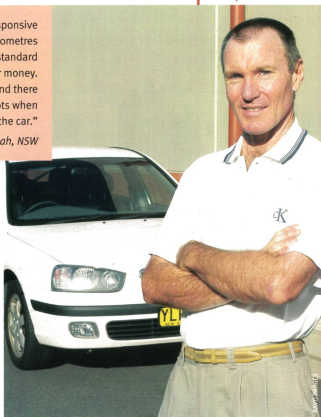
Mark Arnfield, Ourimbah, NSW

GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY

Our ELANTRA reviewers were generally over 50, and looking for a comfortable, reliable and economical car with a good warranty. (At the time, HYUNDAI was the only manufacturer offering a five-year warranty. Since December 2004, this has been matched by MITSUBISHI.)

Other cars on our reviewers' shortlists were a mixed bag, without one main contender, and the ELANTRA's perceived very good value for money tipped the scales for our reviewers (the purchase price and all running costs were generally considered medium to low). They found the car well equipped and window tinting was the main extra purchased.

However, two cars (out of 12) were affected by a recall for a hose, two others had minor problems, and there were some complaints regarding the audio system, visibility out of the car, and ease of access to pedals and controls (for example, the hand brake/gear lever layout). Less frequent grievances also included the difficulty of reading some instruments in poor light, noise and space.



Perfect rice made easy

If you eat a lot of rice, it's well worth getting a rice cooker.

Does your family eat lots of rice? Or can you just not get it to cook perfectly on the stove or in the microwave? An electric rice cooker might be the answer.

Our test of 12 models shows they all make it very easy to cook perfect rice every time. You put in the rice and water, press a button and forget about it. When the water's been absorbed and the rice cooked, the cooker turns itself down to a warm setting that keeps the rice warm for up to 4–5 hours. When you're ready, you serve up nice fluffy, firm rice.

You may have to experiment a couple of times, depending on whether you like your rice a bit firmer or softer than the cooker produces with the recommended water-to-rice ratio. That's particularly true for the two models at the bottom of our table (see page 40).

Adding more water will increase the cooking time and produce softer rice; reducing the amount of water will produce firmer rice. But once you've found the ratio that's right for you, it'll be very easy to reproduce the perfect result.

With rice cookers there's little, if any, spillage, and the bowls have a non-stick coating, so they're less messy and easier to clean than a saucepan. They also save you stovetop space, and you can concentrate on cooking the curry or stir-fry.

If you have a model with a removable cord, you

can leave the rice in the cooker to serve at the table.

But whether you put the rice in a separate serving bowl or serve from the rice cooker, don't use a metal utensil. As our (admittedly rather harsh) durability test showed, the non-stick coating of the bowls scratches relatively easily on most models.

IN A NUTSHELL

On test: 12 rice cookers between \$25 and \$95. You don't need to spend more than \$50 for a good one.

They're generally easy to use and can produce perfect rice every time.

It's less messy than cooking rice in a saucepan, and you can cook larger quantities than in a microwave.

AUSTRIA/PHOTO

WHAT TO BUY

Only two of the tested models (the **MAXIM** and **KAMBROOK**) were a little disappointing at cooking rice compared with the others. Other than those two, there's very little difference between models, so you really don't need to spend more than \$50 on a rice cooker and we've only recommended those costing up to that price. All you have to figure out is the size you need.

Small capacity

PRIMA PRC5 Rice Cooker	\$25
BLACK & DECKER BRC200 Rice Cooker 1L	\$35

Medium capacity

BREVILLE RC12 Rice Master Rice Cooker and Steamer	\$45
SUNBEAM RC2610 Rice Perfect 8	\$40
TIFFANY RC20 Automatic Rice Cooker	\$40

Large capacity

MISTRAL MRC200 Australian Women's Weekly	\$50
KENWOOD RC330 Rice Cooker Vegetable Steamer	\$45

Brand / model (in rank order)

PRIMA PRC5 Rice Cooker	92	100	78	90			
BLACK & DECKER BRC200 Rice Cooker 1L	90	100	80	60		✓	Sealed
MISTRAL MRC200 Australian Women's Weekly 16 cup Rice Cooker	90	100	80	60		✓	Sealed
PANASONIC SR-W18KP — 10 cup Steamer Cuisine	89	100	75	60	ns	✓	Metal /
TEFAL Automatic Rice Cooker Comfort 3.2L	88	100	80	40	✓ (A)		Sealed
BREVILLE RC12 Rice Master Rice Cooker & Steamer	87	100	78	40			Glass
RUSSELL HOBBS RHRC100A Classic Satin 10 cup Rice Cooker	87	100	75	40			Metal
SUNBEAM RC2610 Rice Perfect 8	87	100	78	40		✓	Glass
TIFFANY RC20 Automatic Rice Cooker	87	100	78	40	✓		Glass
KENWOOD RC330 Rice Cooker Vegetable Steamer	86	98	78	40	✓		Glass
MAXIM RCS 10C Rice Cooker & Steamer	83	93	78	40			Glass
KAMBROOK KRC5 Rice Express	80	85	78	60			Glass

PERFORMANCE

1 Overall score (%)	2 Rice cooking score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	4 Durability score (%)
92	100	78	90
90	100	80	60
90	100	80	60
89	100	75	60
88	100	80	40
87	100	78	40
87	100	75	40
87	100	78	40
87	100	78	40
86	98	78	40
83	93	78	40
80	85	78	60

5 FEATURES

Dishwasher-safe bowl	Removable cord	Lid
		Glass
	✓	Sealed
	✓	Sealed
ns	✓	Metal /
✓ (A)		Sealed
		Glass
		Metal
	✓	Glass
✓		Glass
		Glass
		Glass

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in groups according to their size. Prices are recommended retail from November/December 2004, or what we paid in October 2004.

Breville RC12 Rice Master Rice Cooker & Steamer

Black & Decker BRC200 Rice Cooker 1L



Sunbeam RC2610 Rice Perfect 8

Mistral MRC200 Australian Women's Weekly

Tiffany RC20 Automatic Rice Cooker



Kenwood RC330 Rice Cooker Vegetable Steamer



SMALL SIZE

PRIMA PRC5 RICE COOKER

Price: \$25

It has the best overall score and the lowest price. Its non-stick coating was the toughest in the test, but its glass lid allows liquid to splatter out and is a bit difficult to clean.

BLACK & DECKER BRC200 RICE COOKER 1L

Price: \$35

Has a sealed lid, which is clean and convenient, and a removable cord. The handles could be easier to grip.

MEDIUM SIZE

BREVILLE RC12 RICE MASTER RICE COOKER & STEAMER

Price: \$45

Comprehensive instructions. However, the glass lid allows liquid to splatter out and is a bit difficult to clean, and the non-stick coating isn't very scratch-resistant.

SUNBEAM RC2610 RICE PERFECT 8

Price: \$40

Has comprehensive instructions and a removable cord. However, the glass lid allows liquid to splatter out and is a bit difficult to clean, and the non-stick coating isn't very scratch-resistant.

TIFFANY RC20 AUTOMATIC RICE COOKER

Price: \$40

Its glass lid allows liquid to splatter out and is a bit difficult to clean, and the non-stick coating isn't very scratch-resistant.

LARGE SIZE

KENWOOD RC330 RICE COOKER VEGETABLE STEAMER

Price: \$45

Its glass lid allows liquid to splatter out and is a bit difficult to clean, and the non-stick coating isn't very scratch-resistant.

MISTRAL MRC200 AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WEEKLY

Price: \$50

This has a clean and convenient sealed lid, and comes with a long warranty and a removable cord. The handles could be easier to grip.

IFICATIONS

ity	Weight (kg) [*]	Height (mm) [*]	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer/ distributor	Price (\$) ^{**}
	1.8	270	1	China	Prima	25
	2.6	250	2	China	Mistral	35
	3.4	295	3	China	Mistral	50
	2.2	255	1	Thailand	Matsushita	95 (B)
	3.2	290	1	China	Groupe SEB	60
m	2.3	240	1	China	Breville	45 (B)
	2.6	260	2	China	Salton	54 (B)
m	2.4	270	1	China	Sunbeam	40 (B)
m	2.9	300	2	China	GAF Control	40
	2.6	305	1	China	Hagemeyer	45
	2.4	245	1	China	Maxim Housewares	45
	1.9	220	1	China	Kambrook	31 (B)

* Rounded to the nearest 0.1 kg and 5 mm.

** Recommended retail, according to manufacturer information in November/December 2004, unless noted otherwise.

ns Not stated.

(A) Must be rubbed with oil (reconditioned) after being washed several times in a dishwasher.

(B) The price we paid in October 2004.

Other ways of cooking rice

You can get just as good results in a saucepan or microwavé oven, but it's a bit more tricky — especially perfecting the absorption method on a stove. So if you don't think a rice cooker is for you, here are the alternative methods:

■ **Absorption:** In a saucepan, put two cups of water for every cup of uncooked white rice (three cups for brown), and bring it to the boil. Cover the pan immediately with aluminium foil and a tight-fitting lid, and reduce the heat to the lowest possible temperature. Don't remove the lid during cooking. If you're worried it'll stick, take the pan off the heat after 10 minutes for white rice or 30 minutes for brown, and let it stand (covered) for 10–15 minutes. If you're confident, cook both for around 10 minutes longer and it'll be ready to eat straightaway.

■ **Microwave:** Put the same proportions as above of rice and water in a bowl, jug or microwave rice cooker and cook on high for the recommended time: 10 minutes for white rice, 25 for brown. Cover the steam vents in the rice cooker, or partially cover the bowl or jug with plastic wrap, leaving an opening for steam to escape. When it's ready, cover it and let it stand for five to 10 minutes. You can't cook large quantities of rice in one go with this method.

Both methods might need a bit of experimentation to get right, especially with different brands/kinds of rice.

1 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of rice cooking, ease of use and durability, weighted as follows:

- Rice cooking: 60%
- Ease of use: 30%
- Durability: 10%

2 Rice cooking score

We cooked long-grain, short/medium-grain, jasmine and brown rice according to manufacturer recommendations, and assessed whether the rice grains were the right degree of firmness, separate and perfectly cooked.

3 Ease of use score

We assessed the ease of using the controls, assembly and disassembly, cleaning, and dishing out the rice.

4 Durability score

We scrubbed the non-stick coating of the cooking bowls with a scourer up to 5000 times, and assessed the damage to it.

While this is a very harsh test — all the rice cookers come with a plastic spatula and a warning against the use of metal utensils to remove the rice from the bowl — it still gives a comparative assessment of the bowls' durability.

5 Features

See *What to look for*, below, for more on these.

6 Capacity

Comparing the capacity of different models can be difficult and confusing. Manufacturers base their claims on their own measuring cups, which often aren't standard cups (250 mL) but have a different capacity from brand to brand. What's more, some state the cup capacity in millilitres, others in grams (which is the same for water, but not for rice), some claim the capacity of cooked rice, others that of uncooked...

In our table, 'small capacity' means around five 'cups' of uncooked rice, 'medium' around six to eight 'cups', and 'large' around 10 'cups'.

What to look for

The main decision you have to make is what size you need, considering the size of your family, how often you cook rice, and the storage space in your kitchen (rice cookers use up a fair bit of space on your benchtop or in a cupboard).

There's very little between models in terms of features, functions and ease of use.

All the tested models have:

- Parts that are easy to fit together and to separate.
- Generally easy-to-clean parts.
- A control switch that's easy to operate.
- A rice paddle or spoon.
- A measuring cup.
- A steamer tray.
- Automatic shut-off, which turns the cooker to a 'warm' function — a setting that holds the rice at serving temperature for several hours (depending on the model).
- A removable, non-stick cooking bowl (most with volume measurement markings).

Features in the table:

- **Dishwasher-safe:** Rice cookers generally aren't very difficult to clean, as there's little spillage and the bowl has a non-stick coating. But you still may prefer the convenience of dishwasher-safe parts.
- **Removable cord:** You can take the rice cooker to the table to serve from if its cord is removable.
- **Lid:** A separate lid usually doesn't completely seal the cooker, so some liquid may bubble over — with a sealed lid there's no bubbling over. A glass lid allows you to monitor the cooking process.

Spray and wipe

In these times of water restrictions, are waterless car cleaners a reasonable alternative to washing your car?



IN A NUTSHELL

Waterless car cleaners can clean a moderately dirty car, but they're no faster than a hand wash with bucket and sponge and require more elbow grease.

Water is a very valuable resource in Australia, and in some areas water restrictions are currently limiting the methods you can use to wash your car.

So a product that lets you wash it using no or only very little water sounds like a pretty good idea. Or does it? Do you rather cringe at the thought of what spraying your dusty car with less than 100 mL of liquid and wiping it off with a towel will do to the paintwork?

We wanted to find out what waterless car cleaners are about, and tested four products we found on the internet and/or in car accessory shops.

HOW THEY WORK

All the products claim to clean and polish moderately dirty cars in one step without scratching.

They're liquids, a fine mist of which you're supposed to spray on a dirty section of your car. The cleaning ingredients are then said to immediately encapsulate the dirt, thereby preventing scratching when you wipe the moisture and the dirt off again after a few seconds with a towel or terry cloth. You then use another towel or cloth to buff the section, move on to the next section and repeat the process.

Three of the products come with their own spray pump bottle, and you use the product as is. The fourth (**SUPRIMO**) is a concentrate you dilute with water. It doesn't come with a spray bottle, so you have to provide your own.

THE RESULTS

We used each product on several cars and found:

- **Dust and tar** came off after one spraying. However, some dead bugs needed more than one spray to come off, and thick bird droppings couldn't be removed at all.
- We didn't notice any **scratching** (much to the delight of the staff who'd volunteered to have their cars cleaned), but would certainly follow the recommendation to limit the use of the products to lightly or moderately dirty cars.
- We also checked for a **water-repellent effect** similar to car polish. The **DRI WASH 'N GUARD** and **PRO-MA** had some effect, but not as much as a car wax. The **NO-WET** (which contains carnauba wax) was comparable to car wax in that respect, while the **SUPRIMO** didn't show any water-repelling effect.
- We compared the **time and effort** required to clean a car with the spray products to using a bucket of water and a sponge (no hoses with water restrictions!). Our testers found all the methods took a similar time, but the waterless products (except the **SUPRIMO**) required more elbow grease than the water and sponge method — more comparable to polishing or waxing a car. With the **SUPRIMO**, the standard spray bottle we used sprays out much more liquid than the special spray pump bottles provided with the other products, making it easier.
- The **cost per wash** for these products can vary dramatically, depending on how generously you

use them. For two of the three non-concentrates, manufacturers claim that about 60 mL is all you need for an average car (the third, **NO-WET**, doesn't give a recommended quantity). That's not a lot of liquid, and it's difficult to judge how much it is when distributed over a whole car.

Based on those claims, and depending on the size of bottle you buy, a wash would cost between about \$4 and \$7. However, our testers used up to twice as much product when going by their gut feeling. Only after a demonstration by one of the manufacturers that we attended anonymously did our testers realise how little is actually required. Our test washes cost \$6–\$8, and without such a demonstration, we think it's quite likely you'd also use more than 60 mL.

For the **SUPRIMO** concentrate, overuse doesn't have such a big impact on costs — and it's by far the cheapest to start with anyway, costing about \$1.50–\$2 per wash.

ARE THEY FOR YOU?

Waterless car cleaners do a reasonable job and are an alternative to washing your car with water and a sponge or in a commercial car wash, especially if:

- Your car doesn't usually get very dirty.
- You live in an area with water restrictions.
- You haven't got any off-road space to wash your car.
- You don't want to use a commercial car wash.
- You don't mind a bit of physical effort when cleaning your car.

Brand / model (in alphabetical order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Website	Size (mL)	Price (\$)*
DRI WASH 'N GUARD Ultra-Ion Waterless Car Wash & Protective Glaze	Dri Wash 'n Guard	www.driwash.com.au	1000 (A)	110
NO-WET Waterless Car Wash, Wax, Polish & Sealant	No-Wet Carwash	www.planetproducts.com.au	225 (B)	20
PRO-MA Maxi Dri Kleen Waterless Car Wash	Pro-Ma Systems	www.pro-masystems.com.au	300 (C)	18
SUPRIMO Car Kleen Concentrate	Blue Edge Technology	www.blueedgetech.com.au/suprimo	250 (D)	50

* The price we paid in November 2004, rounded to the nearest dollar.

(A) Including spray pump bottle, terry towel and buffing cloth. Also available: 500 mL for \$60.

(B) Comes in a spray pump bottle. Also available: 500 mL refill for \$30.

(C) Comes in a spray pump bottle. Also available: 5 L refill for \$204.

(D) Doesn't include spray bottle. It's a concentrate — 250 mL makes about 8 L of car wash solution.



225ML

TAMARA GRAHAM

Power-packed

Many high-tech devices, such as digital cameras, need batteries with plenty of grunt. Are rechargeables up to the job?

IN A NUTSHELL

High-capacity nickel-metal-hydride (NiMH) batteries are far better value for money than non-rechargeables in products like digital cameras that put a high drain on the battery. They also last much longer per cycle than most non-rechargeables for this kind of use.

Modern NiMH chargers can recharge high-capacity batteries in one to two hours.

More and more portable high-tech products are entering our lives, and digital cameras in particular have become very popular.

They run on batteries and require lots of power compared to other battery-operated devices such as a motor toy or conventional camera. Battery manufacturers have been keeping up with these increasing demands by introducing new types of non-rechargeable batteries (such as lithium), and by increasing the capacity of rechargeable nickel-metal-hydride (NiMH) batteries.

If you use a digital camera or other portable digital device a fair bit and are going through a lot of non-rechargeable batteries, it's worth changing to rechargeables for everyday use and keeping the non-rechargeables for emergencies when you haven't been able to recharge the others.

The upfront cost for rechargeable batteries is relatively high — especially for the high-capacity NiMH models in this test and a suitable quick-charger: two sets of four batteries plus charger will set you back around \$100 to \$140, depending on the model. You could buy around 50–70 of the cheaper non-rechargeables we tested for the same money.

But rechargeables will save you money in the long run if you use battery-powered high-tech products regularly. For example, if you use four non-rechargeables a month, you'll recover the set-up cost for rechargeables in 1–1.5 years.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE				SPECIFICATIONS		
	1 Overall score (%)	2 Value for money score (%)	3 Consistency score (%)	4 Environment score (%)	Rechargeable	Claimed capacity (mAh)	Type
ENERGIZER Rechargeable 2300	85	91	67	90	✓	2300	NiMH
DIGITOR Rechargeable 2000 (A)	84	83	91	80	✓	2000	NiMH
FUJIFILM Rechargeable 2100	81	82	78	80	✓	2100	NiMH
SANYO Advanced 2300 (B)	70	86	28	80	✓	2300	NiMH
MAHA Powerex 2200 (C)	67	63	70	70	✓	2200	NiMH
JACKSON Rechargeable 2000	58	51	58	70	✓	2000	NiMH
POWERBASE 2300 (D)	55	59	32	70	✓	2300	NiMH
DURACELL Ultra M3 Technology	26	2	100	0		na	Alkaline
ENERGIZER e ² Lithium	26	2	100	0		na	Lithium
KODAK Max Digital Camera (E)	26	1	100	0		na	Oxy alkaline
PANASONIC Primary Nickel for Digital Camera (F)	26	2	100	0		na	Primary nickel

And you'll prevent a lot of batteries from going to landfill. Over 250 charging cycles, one of the top performers in our test can replace 300–400 non-rechargeables.

Once NiMH batteries reach the end of their life, they're OK to be disposed of with your normal household waste.

INCREASING CAPACITY

We bought all the rechargeable AA NiMH models with a capacity of at least 2000 mAh that we could find in a wide range of Sydney shops in March/April 2004 (it takes a long time to test the life of batteries).

For comparative purposes we also bought four non-rechargeable models specifically marketed for use in high-drain devices such as digital cameras.

Manufacturers continue to squeeze more and more capacity into rechargeable batteries, and unfortunately a number of the models tested were superseded by higher-capacity ones during our several-months-long endurance test:

■ The 2100 mAh KODAK and PANASONIC we tested were replaced by 2300 and 2400 mAh models respectively. The tested models performed well and would have made it into our *What to buy* list. So the new ones are likely to be good buys as well.

■ The 2100 mAh SONY in our test was replaced by a 2300 mAh model. It worked well but wouldn't have made it into our *What to buy* list because it was relatively expensive (\$10/battery).

■ The 2100 mAh VARTA we tested has been discontinued.

■ INCA and POWERHAUS have released 2500 mAh models, replacing the 2300 mAh ones we tested. Neither of the tested models performed well enough to make it into our *What to buy* list.

WHAT TO BUY

	Cost per battery
ENERGIZER Rechargeable 2300	\$5.50
DIGITOR Rechargeable 2000	\$5.00
FUJIFILM Rechargeable 2100	\$5.00

Upgraded battery

The KODAK Max Rechargeable Digital Camera 2300 and PANASONIC Rechargeable 2400 mAh are likely to be good buys as well (see *Increasing capacity*, left).

On average, the above models lasted about 2.5 times longer in our test cycle than all the non-rechargeables except the **ENERGIZER e² Lithium**, which lasted about 50% longer than the best rechargeables. So if you're in a situation where extra-long battery life is important and you don't have a second set of rechargeables, the **ENERGIZER** (\$5/battery) is a good one-off alternative.



WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- While the **SANYO** is very good value for money, it had lost about half of its initial capacity after 250 charging cycles (see note 3, below).
- The other rechargeables aren't as good value for money as the recommended ones and/or had lost a lot of their initial capacity after 250 cycles.

The right charger

Matching high-capacity NiMH rechargeable batteries with the right charger is important or you may not get the most out of them and could even damage them. Look for a charger that:

- Is designed for the capacity of the batteries you're using.
- Automatically reduces the charging capacity to a trickle once the batteries are fully charged.

QUICK CHARGE

VARTA is offering a new **15 Minute Charge & Go** charger and NiMH battery system (which we haven't tested) that allows a 15-minute recharge time.

Manufacturer / distributor	Cost per battery (\$)*
Energizer	5.50
Smith Electronics	5.00
Im	5.00
o	5.00
on Industries	5.00
ter Instruments	6.50
tte	7.50
gizer	2.10
ork Communications	5.00
sonic	3.25
	1.65

* Recommended retail price, according to manufacturer information in late 2004.

na Not applicable: the capacity of non-rechargeable batteries varies depending on the discharge rate, and no claims are made regarding capacity on the products.

(A) Has been renamed DSE Rechargeable 2000.

(B) Will be replaced by a 2500 mAh model.

(C) Only available over the internet: www.nznature.co.nz/mshop/spi//2_s0L_1757.

(D) Has been upgraded to 2500 mAh, but 2300 mAh stock may still be available.

(E) Will soon be upgraded.

(F) Has been replaced by Oxide model, but may still be available.

1 Overall score

This consists of the following:

- Value for money score: 50%
- Consistency score: 25%
- Environment score: 25%

2 Value for money score

We continuously drained and recharged four samples of each battery 250 times in a scenario simulating continuous use in a digital camera. We then calculated the average running time you get per dollar of their purchase price and converted that to a percentage score.

■ For the NiMH models, the score is based on the price for four batteries plus a quick-charger, and a life of 250 cycles.

■ For non-rechargeable models in the test for comparative purposes, the score is based on four batteries.

3 Consistency score

We scored the drop in the time the batteries lasted between the first and 250th cycles. A large drop means the model is less likely to last for as many cycles as a model that keeps its capacity. And the bigger the drop, the more likely it is you'll become frustrated as it lasts for shorter and shorter times.

4 Environment score

Based on the number of alkaline batteries the rechargeable would prevent from going to landfill.

Cooking with science

Fancy a sardines-on-toast sorbet? Or caviar with white chocolate? These are some of the delights spawned by the new science of 'molecular gastronomy'.

Food scientists have been looking at cooking from a new angle and have come up with some surprising results, including rather unusual flavour combinations, so chefs can create dishes that seem odd but can taste delicious.

Flavours can have hundreds of separate molecular components, but it seems that if two flavours have a component in common they'll taste good together — like fish and chips, or strawberries and cream. So by comparing lists of molecules in various foods, scientists have come up with some new combinations. Garlic and coffee's another you might like to try.

On a more practical note, molecular gastronomy claims that if you can't afford a good whisky, you can buy a cheap brand and add a little vanilla flavour. The vanilla is said to create just the right 'roundness'.

New ways of cooking are also emerging. If you want really tender and juicy lamb, science says you should keep the temperature at 58°C throughout the meat. This is hot enough to break down the tissue, but not so hot as to make the meat go tough.

It's a good theory, but not so easy to do with your chops on the barbie. After much experimenting, the molecular gastronomists came up with cooking the meat in a frying pan kept at just above 100°C, turning it constantly. It would take an hour for lamb chops to cook at this temperature, leaving plenty of time for a few beers.



Healthy image?

We were amused to read that the UK roadside restaurant chain **LITTLE CHEF** had planned to slim down its chubby chef logo to a toned version in a tracksuit — it was thought that a slimmer mascot would be more in line with current thinking about the issues of healthier eating. Then two national polls found that the vast majority of people voting were rather fond of the rotund chef figure, and wanted to keep it.

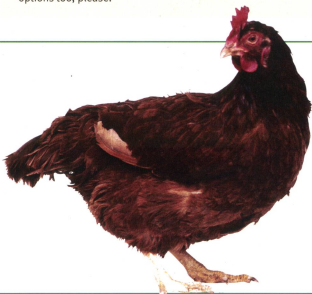
It reminded us of **KFC**, which was once called **KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN**, but changed its name, thereby avoiding the unhealthy image many people associate with the word 'fried'.

But it takes more than a change of logo or brand name to change people's perceptions of a company, so bring on the healthier menu options too, please.

NO MORE GM WHITE LIES

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has ruled that labelling chicken as 'not genetically modified' could be misleading (if technically correct) when the chicken has been fed on GM soy or corn, for example.

Baiada Poultry and Barter Steggles are two of the largest producers of chicken meat, and use GM feed. Some of their product labels currently say 'not genetically modified', which could mislead any consumers who want to avoid GM altogether. Thanks to recent pressure from **CHOICE** and **Greenpeace** on the ACCC and chicken producers, these labels are soon to disappear.



the CHOICE Everyday Internet Handbook

Using the internet smartly for your lifestyle needs

Adapted by Chris Ruggles of Computer CHOICE

Find out why the internet is such an invaluable tool for everyday life with this easy-to-read guide. It provides the first steps to understanding and navigating the internet, explaining the terminology in plain English and demystifying the technology. Discover how you can use it for:

- **Communication** — email, chat or send photos to friends down the street or relatives on the other side of the world.
- **Buying and selling** — buy groceries, music, books or even a house in another country.
- **Managing finances** — compare mortgages, interest rates or carry out bank transactions.
- **Research** — your family tree or even the meaning of life!
- **Media, leisure or entertainment** — check the news and weather, book holidays or tickets to a show.

Packed with case histories, tips and checklists, this book will benefit all those who can see the advantages of using the internet but who've been inhibited by age or lack of experience.

Chris Ruggles has been a researcher and journalist with the Australian Consumers' Association for 14 years. He's been professionally observing, using and reporting on the internet for well over 10 years.

NEW

The CHOICE EVERYDAY INTERNET HANDBOOK

Using the Internet smartly for your lifestyle needs



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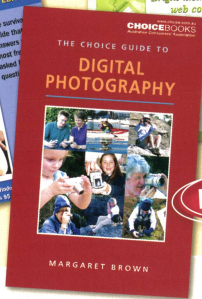
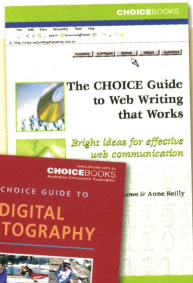
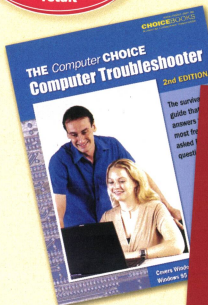
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NEW

recalls&bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in *CHOICE*. For comprehensive recall information go to the Federal Treasury website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Consumer Safety Unit on (02) 6263 2747.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD: Glass Jar Pasta Company has

recalled baskets from the hampers:

■ **Hot Chocolate for Two** (product code 17871174).

■ **Tea for Two** (17871181).

■ **Coffee for Two** (17871228).

■ **Festive Delights Hamper** (35209867).

The hampers were sold exclusively through Target and Target Country stores between October 2004 and January 2005.

The problem: The baskets from the hampers may contain the larvae of foreign insects that are of quarantine concern.

What to do: Place the basket (without its contents) in a secured plastic bag and:

- Return it to any Target or Target Country store for a refund; or
- Treat the basket yourself by placing the bag and basket in a freezer for 14 days; or
- Burn the basket in a safe manner, observing any local fire restrictions and regulations.

For more information call 1800 814 788.

FOOD: Peters & Browne has recalled

Brownies Whipping Cream, in a 300 mL, 600 mL or 1 L Tetra Pak, best-before date 29/12/04, sold through major retailers in WA.

The problem: It may contain *E. coli*.

What to do: If you froze it for later use, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 625 612, 9:30 am to 4 pm, for more information.

FOOD: Coles Supermarkets has

recalled **Candy Lane Chocolate Coated Sultanas**, in a 400 g packet, with "Best before 20 Oct 05 4294" and APN 9306061191109 on the label, sold in NSW and Victoria.

The problem: The packets may contain chocolate-coated peanuts.

What to do: If you suffer from a peanut allergy or intolerance, don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 061 562 for more information.

FOOD: Hungs Trading Company has

recalled **Seawoods Soft Flour Cake**, in a 250 g plastic packet, best-before date

08 03 2006, sold in the ACT and NSW.

The problem: It contains undeclared milk protein.

What to do: If you suffer from a milk protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call (02) 9755 1543.

FOOD: Govinda's Yummies has

recalled **Govinda's Yummy Bar**, 55 g, all best-before dates up to and including May 31, 2005.

The problem: It has a dairy-free claim, but contains milk protein.

What to do: If you suffer from a milk protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call (07) 4057 5655.

FOOD: Unilever Australasia has

recalled **Streets Cyclone** and **Summer Trio Ice Creation**, all flavours and batch codes, sold as:

- **Cyclone** single unit, 76 g.
- **Cyclone** eight-unit multi-pack, 690 mL.
- **Summer Trio** eight-unit multi-pack (including two **Cyclone** single units), 620 mL.

The products were sold nationally, as well as in New Zealand, Fiji and Pago Pago.

The problem: They contain undeclared milk protein.

What to do: If you have a milk protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat them. Return the product wrapper or multi-pack carton to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call 1800 801 885 between 6 am and 10 pm EDT.

DRINK: Diageo Australia has recalled

Pre-mixed Gordon's Gin and Tonic, in a 375 mL aluminium can, best-before date Feb 06 4292.

The problem: Faulty can lining has resulted in the discovery of food-grade lining particles in the drink.

What to do: Don't drink it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 789 344 for more information.

TOY: National Parts — Autopro has

recalled **Remote Control Car CAR-**

WRX Blue and **CAR Red**, sold from December 8 to December 19, 2004.

The problem: The battery pack under charge and/or working can become excessively hot, which may present a hazard to touch.

What to do: Stop using it and return it to the place of purchase for a refund or replacement. For more information call (03) 8791 2700.

TOY: Australia Post has recalled

Remote Control Lunar Car Turbo Twister — Racing Sports Gallop and AC adaptor, product number 73122, serial number 21358, on sale since September 13, 2004.

The problem: The AC adaptor doesn't comply with the relevant Australian standard regarding electrical supply pin dimensions. There is a risk of fire if the adaptor is used.

What to do: Stop using it and return it to any Australia Post outlet for a refund, or call 13 13 18 for more information.

CLOTHING: Funtastic has recalled

its **Bratz Rash Vest**, available in two styles:

- Pink and lilac horizontal stripes around the body, lilac sleeves, a character print of a Bratz figure on the front and the word Bratz on the left sleeve, with an eight-digit code (35207559, 35207566, 35207573 or 35207894) printed below the care instruction label sewn into the back of the neck.
- Pink with a brown collar, brown dots on the sleeves and a brown cuff on each sleeve, with a character print of a Bratz figure on the lower right side of the body, with an eight-digit code (35207559, 35207566, 35207573 or 35207894) located as described above.

These tops were sold exclusively through Target and Target Country stores between September 1 and December 16, 2004.

The problem: Tests found that the body of the vest failed to reach a UPF 50+ rating, as indicated by a swing tag attached to the garment.

What to do: Stop wearing it and return it to your nearest Target, Target Country or Baby Target store for a refund. For more information call 1800 244 543.

DRINK BOTTLE: Happy House has recalled **Kids Range — Butterfly Fizz, Sweet Cheeks and Crazy Daisy drink bottles**, sold with fabric drink cooler bags in Happy House stores and some newsagents and gift stores from September 15, 2004.

The problem: The drink bottle nibs (adjustable part of the mouthpiece) can become dislodged through normal use, which presents a choking hazard to children three years of age and under.

What to do: Stop using the bottle immediately. Place it in a bag marked 'defective' and return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call (08) 8371 4599.

BIKES: Toy Group Australia has

recalled the bicycle models:

- **Hot Wheels 16"** boys' bike, item number 240, APN 9323247002400.
- **Hot Wheels 20"** boys' bike, item number 246, APN 9323247002462.
- **Princess 16"** girls' bike, item number 239, APN 9323247002394.
- **My Scene 20"** girls' bike, item number 242, APN 9323247002424.

The bikes were sold in Kmart stores from November to December 2004.

The problem: The bikes have a defective headstem and handlebar system made out of substandard materials. These items could bend if put under extreme duress.

What to do: Stop using them, and return them to Kmart for a refund. For more information call 1800 333 842.

EXERCISE EQUIPMENT: Guthy-Renker

Australia has recalled **Ab Lounge** abdominal exercise equipment, sold between July 16 and November 23, 2004, with the serial numbers ALX-000001 to ALX-037999 inclusive, and all machines that start with the serial numbers 03 44 through to 04 36.

The problem: You can catch your fingers in the hinges when folding or unfolding the machines.

What to do: If you haven't received and installed a free safety bracket, stop using the machine and call 1800 500 903 for more information.

BENCH: Freedom Group has recalled

Cove bench, 130 cm and 220 cm, with a charcoal-coloured aluminium frame and a slatted timber benchtop, sold nationally and in New Zealand.

The problem: The timber slat panels on the top of the bench may collapse and cause injury. Further reinforcement is required.

What to do: Stop using the bench and call 1300 135 588 for more information.

aboutchoice

The Australian Consumers' Association is a not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance their quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

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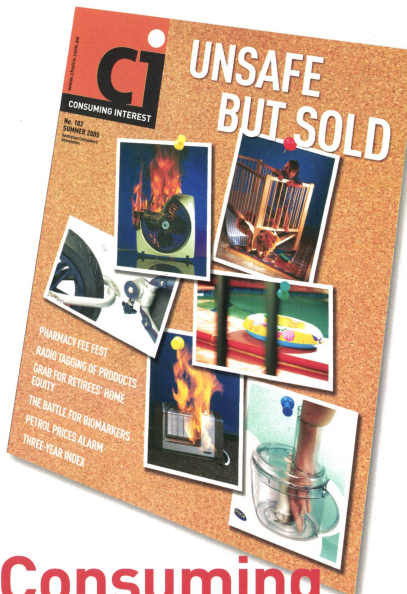
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* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts and other small pieces.

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Peanut lovers beware?

If these peanuts "may contain traces of peanuts and other nuts", we wonder what constitutes the bulk of the product?

BLACKCURRANT FLAVOURED WATER. INGREDIENTS: PURIFIED WATER, CONCENTRATED JUICES (PEACH, APPLE & GRAPE), FRUCTOSE, CALCIUM LACTATE (327), FLAVOUR (0.1%), FOOD ACID (330), PRESERVATIVES (211, 223), NIACIN (B3), PANTOTHENIC ACID (B5), VITAMIN B6, SODIUM FLUORIDE, FOLIC ACID, BIOTIN, VITAMIN B12.

At least the alleged peanuts *may* contain traces of peanuts: the same can't be said for blackcurrant in this blackcurrant sports water ...



Manufactured by: Cookie Man Foods India Pvt. Ltd., No.5, Lady Madhavan Road, Mahalingapuram, Chennai 600 034. Ph: 2817 1762/2817 1769.



TOP NOTCH NZ

2004 Nobilo Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc
We have been searching for a quality Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc that we could sell to our loyal customers for under \$10 for a long, long time and boy did we find it. Do not let this one pass you by, it is a gem.



WELL, ACTUALLY, NO, YOU DIDN'T FIND IT

You'd better get back to it and make it a long, long, *long* time searching (though surely that can't be too bad a job!).

FOR PROTECTION AND A FAKE TAN

Just slip slop slap some timber oil on your skin! Or are they suggesting your outdoor furniture should be wearing a t-shirt and hat?



Slip Slop Slap.

Take care of your timber the same way you care for your skin. Give it a coat of timber oil every three months to ensure it's protected.



Would this be a Cookie Wallah cookie, then?

It popped up in a bag of goodies handed out on a Qantas flight ...

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The prize for the best entry goes to D Kitchener. The prize for Jan/Feb's best entry went to A & L Kelly, not V Ward as printed. Thanks also to T Breen, L Johnstone, J Mulholland and J & J Quinn for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep them coming.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.